

The dismissal (for now) of charges against Fr. Benedicto Ejares has reopened wounds instead of providing a clear path to resolve allegations of sexual misconduct by a priest. No party is satisfied with the outcome.

Not even the Cebu Archdiocese can claim the case has been put to rest or that a dismissal of criminal charges has removed the stigma of how the local church dragged its feet in dealing with this elusive shepherd and the children he refused to face after the scandal surfaced a year ago.

To welcome the Cebu City Prosecutor's Office dismissal of the case is to calmly accept that seven girls, who have nothing personal to gain by making public their individual humiliation, have lied or read too much into a clergyman's "friendly" gesture of caressing their limbs and playing with their bra straps during the sacrament of confession.

The prosecutor must have expected a world of maturity from public high school students.

Did one girl misinterpret Fr. Ben Ejares' touch? Two girls? Three? All seven? Not likely.

We can only imagine the violated psyche of these young victims on the cusp of womanhood. They deserve the protection of the law and the ministering comfort of the church.

What's tragic is that a church policy of accountability and a procedure to hear out complaints of sexual misconduct by the clergy was never used. The guidelines were laid down by Philippine bishops in 2005 but for one reason or another were not applied in the case of Fr. Ben Ejares.

That left parties to rely on the criminal justice system, which in this case went out of its depth in quoting Scripture to define the role of priests as the "alter ego" of Jesus Christ.

A priest has no business laying a hand on a female penitent in the first place. You don't need to memorize the Revised Penal Code or Canon law to know that. A man's hand stroking a teenage girl's body while she's baring her soul in a private confession is the act of a predator, not a priest.

No stretch of the imagination or wellspring of charity could bring a parent to view this conduct as anything but revolting.

Fr. Ben Ejares admitted having touched the students, one after the other. He said he acted without malice. If God-like standards are to be applied, then the prosecutor should have seen a clear case of abuse by an adult who had moral ascendancy over a trusting child. It's also clear that the priest needs professional help.

The "acts of lasciviousness" documented by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) had all the weight of used tissue paper in the hands of the prosecutor. But the girl's testimonies shouldn't end up in the wastebasket.

It's good to know that advocates of child welfare and social workers haven't given up on the case and are seeking a review by the Dept. of Justice.

We support continuing efforts to get to the truth about what happened, which is necessary if any genuine healing is to take place on the part of the girls, the priest, the community and a wounded Church.