

January 21, 2007 - Questioning victims our national pastime

By Margery Eagan, Boston Herald Columnist

Why didn't he escape? Why didn't he call the cops? What's the real story? What's wrong with him?

America - and many in the media - spent last week asking those questions based on our armchair know-nothing analysis of the supposed mistakes of Shawn Hornbeck, the 15-year-old Missouri boy kidnapped at age 11 as he was riding his bike.

By week's end we'd turned on his long-, long-suffering parents as well. Why did they put him on Oprah? On Larry King? Why are they parading themselves and their son before the cameras, which we are all watching, by the way? What's the real story? What's wrong with them?

Here's what I've not heard: What's wrong with the pizzeria worker who allegedly spent his days and nights plotting to snatch little boys off school buses and bikes?

Yet this is so typical.

This is what we do, particularly with children and sex crimes. We criticize victims. We talk as if we, or our children, would know better. We have no idea what we're talking about - though we should.

Remember priest abuse, the story both America and its media have grown tired of? Enough already. Move on. Don't want to hear anymore.

You could call it church abuse fatigue. Or just a general aversion to these kinds of stories, a continued hesitance to believe them, a continued hostility to victims themselves and a vicious hostility to their attorneys.

This week Mitchell Garabedian and Carmen Durso, lawyers who've represented hundreds of church survivors, talked about the effects of our "enough already" attitude.

It means there's almost no public pressure on the church to settle fairly anymore. It means that the Boston archdiocese employs full-time lobbyists to fight tougher legislation ending statutes of limitations on these crimes - and nobody's screaming about it. (Want to? Call 617-722-2000 and tell your hometown rep you're watching what they're doing.)

It means survivors who want therapy must be interviewed by the archdiocese and detail what happened before their therapy gets approved. It means continued suspicion that survivors are lying and in it only for the money, as if \$75,000 - the average settlement pot - is some Trump-like fortune. Of the more than 300 clients Garabedian has represented, perhaps a half-dozen told suspicious stories, he says. "But even if it were 20 percent of them, does that mean they can rape the other 80 percent?"

Jeff Scolamiero, 41, understands all this. From age 5 to 13, he says he was molested, allegedly by priest Ernest Tourigney, a charismatic man "everybody loved," Scolamiero says.

This priest, who also stands accused by many others, allegedly took the fatherless boy, with his mother's blessing, to Boston on weekend trips to his apartment. By 10, Jeff Scolamiero was drinking, smoking, doing drugs. Now a union laborer, he struggles daily to stay sober, just to function. Yet like so many in this church story, when he married, Scolamiero asked Tourigney to perform the ceremony.

We'd be all over that little fact were Scolamiero's story on the front page today, wouldn't we? And we'd be asking, too, why didn't he escape? Call the cops? Why should he get \$75,000? Why should his lawyer get anything? Why? Why? Why? Why?

But we would not be asking why Ernest Tourigney has lived "free as a bird," in Scolamiero's words, by the ocean, in lovely Pocasset. Or why the Catholic Church continues to treat child victims like the ones who've done something wrong - because we do, too.

So here's my question: What is wrong with us?