

An open letter to the St. Mary's Parish Board:

I learned of the situation regarding the priest at St. Mary's who is accused of sexually abusing a child (now grown) through an article on the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) Web site.

There are many things I could say to you: I could tell you of my own struggles as the survivor of sexual assault by a priest, or I could refer you to the SNAP Web site, where you would find an article that could help you deal with your feelings when your priest is accused of sexual assault, or I could tell you how I felt when I read the glowing eulogy for the priest who raped me, a eulogy written by an archdiocese that knew the priest had sexually assaulted at least seven girls.

But instead I will just offer you this fact: One of every four girls and one of every six boys sitting in your church is the victim of sexual abuse. One in five children.

You have just taught those children a lesson they will never forget. They may not remember everything they hear in their stranger-danger classes, but this they will remember: When someone accuses a respected adult of sexually assaulting a child, St. Mary's Parish will stand behind the adult, not the child.

Let us say that one child in particular, maybe a 12-year-old girl, has somehow gathered the courage to tell that she is being forced to have sex with her stepfather or uncle or teacher or even a priest. She has been sitting in the class where her teacher instructs the students that if someone is touching them in a way they are not comfortable with, they need to tell someone, another grownup, someone in authority, and then they will be safe.

But that lesson is meaningless, as she now understands. The real lesson is the one you have just given her: If the person who is sexually assaulting her is a respected member of the community, NO ONE WILL BELIEVE HER. NO ONE. She understands this now: She has no one to help her, and she is alone.

For all the people sitting in your parish who are current or past victims of sexual assault, my heart goes out.

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