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Sexual Abuse of Children: Ten Years of Hard-Earned Knowledge

Today we're sharing our blog space with Deacon Bernard Nojadera, a colleague who directs the U.S. bishops' critical office that works with clergy sexual abuse of children.

With 2012, the Catholic Church looks back on a decade of learning about a problem which may be decades of centuries old: the sexual abuse of minors by those who would mentor them.

The crisis in the Church in the United States reached a head in 2002, when newspaper coverage nationwide highlighted the existence of this horrific crime and moral travesty. We now know that others, including some sports organizations and other groups where adults mentor youth, have yet to confront this crisis within their own ranks.

In the United States, the Catholic Church adopted a plan to address the issue, called the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. It has spent billions of dollars on settlements, safe environment education, and background checks to do all it can to prevent the abuse of children in its care. We have come to some understanding of how to address the problem, gaining knowledge that can benefit more than the Catholic Church.

Some of what we've learned:

- The guiding principle when confronting child sexual abuse is to remember that it is most of all about the person who was abused. It is not about the offender, the institution, or anyone's reputation. It is about helping a child.
- People can learn. In the ten years since establishment of the Charter we have moved from disbelief to action. We have learned that what once seemed unbelievable is, unfortunately, credible and must be faced. Training, reference checks, and background evaluations now are a normal part of parish life to keep children safe. We recommend these steps for all who deal with youth.
- Sexual abuse of a minor is a sickness that can be contained through vigilance but will not disappear. Incidents of sexual abuse are still occurring in the one place that ought to be the safest place. We cannot let our guard down. The work is not finished.
- Critical situations impel people and institutions to change. We have seen the culture of our parishes and schools evolve. People now accept that child sexual abuse exists and are willing to help stop it from occurring. They no longer assume someone else will take care of it.

- Child sexual abuse is a reality society must confront. No institution is immune from it. Learning to respond to the victim of abuse is the first job of any institution, community or family.
- The court of public opinion holds institutional leaders to a high standard. Leaders who forgo an immediate and appropriate response to abuse of a child do so at their own peril. There is hardly any other issue which evokes such intolerance as not acting in the face of child sexual abuse.
- Parents are willing to step up and make sure parishes and schools are following policies and procedures to protect children. With this critical issue, few people reply, “I just don’t have time to get involved.”
- The task of protecting children can be shared. Clergy, employees, volunteers, parents, and teachers realize that bystanders can be their allies in protecting children.
- Child sexual abuse is a hard topic to discuss, but training adults to protect children has given the topic a forum where the uncomfortable reality can be discussed.
- Victims of child sexual abuse can heal and live productive lives. Steps that help bring them toward healing include seriously listening to their stories and expressing profound sorrow for what they have endured. As awful as the experience has been for a person, there is hope, a gift of grace from a loving God.

<http://usccbmedia.blogspot.com/2011/12/sexual-abuse-of-children-ten-years-of.html>