

Bishop Addresses Crisis in the Church

By Bishop Victor Galeone

My Dear Friends in Christ,

The Catholic Church in the United States seems to be in a state of siege at present. The headlines in the press are horrific: "Church Cover-up!" "Pedophile Priest", "Millions Paid Out." I have received letters from a number of disgruntled parishioners, demanding answers to some rather pointed questions. So rather than my usual letter this month, I'd like to address the present scandal by utilizing a question and answer format.

How many priests have been accused of pedophilia in the United States?

First, it's important to distinguish between true pedophilia, which is sexual contact with a child below the age of puberty, and ephebophilia, which is sexual molestation of a minor who has reached the age of puberty. True pedophilia is relatively rare. The vast majority of the cases involve priests who have been sexually active with someone below the age of sexual consent, often 16 or 17 years old. In a study conducted by the Archdiocese of Chicago in the early 90s, less than two percent of their priests were probably guilty of misconduct with minors at some point of 2,200 priests, only one was an actual pedophile.

But even two percent of priests are terrible. Could that be due to celibacy?

Every denomination has its share of abuse cases and some of the worst involve non-Catholics. An Anglican diocese in Canada is about to declare bankruptcy as a result of lawsuits triggered by decades of abuse, yet most of the Anglican clergy are married. I recall an incident during my years in Baltimore in the late 1980s. A Catholic priest had been charged with sexually abusing a teenage boy for about a year. The story made the front page newspaper several times. About a year later, an Episcopal priest, father of three children, was arrested for having abused dozens of his altar boys and boy scouts over a 20-year period. That story appeared once on an inside page of the Metro section.

Why do some dioceses try to cover up their cases?

The term "cover-up" implies complicity in a crime. What is usually meant is legal confidentiality. All parties to a case must first agree on confidentiality. Often both the plaintiff and defense seek such agreements in order to maintain privacy.

But didn't some bishops allow priest abusers back into services?

Back in the 1960s when the first clergy abuse cases surfaced, the psychological profession maintained that pedophilia was a curable condition. Accordingly, an accused priest was returned to active ministry after a period of treatment at a counseling center. By the early 1980s, however, psychologists had reached another conclusion: The condition is treatable, but like alcoholism, incurable. Since then, most dioceses have sent such priests away for treatment and then returned them to the lay state.

How much money has the church paid out for claims of sexual abuse and where does that money come from?

Since each diocese is financially autonomous, all reported amounts are mere estimates. Most of the settlements have come from diocesan liability insurance. In extraordinary cases, few dioceses have had to use other assets.

What is the present policy of our own diocese when a priest is charged?

We follow the policy that was agreed to by all seven of the Florida dioceses. The five main points of our policy may be stated briefly:

- Respond at once to all credible allegations of sexual abuse.
- Remove the alleged offender of his duties at once, if the allegation is credible. Refer the offender for a medical treatment.
- Report the allegation to civil authorities at once if the victim is still a minor and cooperate with the investigation.
- Reach out to the victims and their families with sincere concern for their spiritual and emotional well-being.
- Reveal the incident as openly as possible, while respecting the privacy of the individuals involved.

What are the bishops doing about the present crisis?

Many bishops are revisiting their present policies. Clergy misconduct is one of the main agenda items for the bishops' meeting in Dallas this June. Here in the Diocese of Saint Augustine, since the late 1980s, there has been in place a response team, composed of professionals, to give immediate attention to any credible allegation made against a priest or other diocesan employee. If an allegation is proved factual, the offender will never serve as a priest again anywhere. In this area, our present policy is "zero tolerance." Additionally, our screening of seminary candidates has become more exacting, however there is no accurate test that can predict or identify such behaviors.

Notwithstanding what you said before, don't you think it's time for the Catholic Church to revisit the whole question of celibacy?

The problem is not about celibacy. The problem is about commitment and faith. I recall what a retreat master said years ago: "The best celibates would make the best married men, and the best married men would make the best celibates. Both are men of their word - and once they've given that word, they'll be true to it." I would like to conclude with what the French philosopher, Jean Guitton, said years ago: "In an age so steeped in sex and pleasure-seeking materialism, should there not be somewhere on this planet those who joyously and generously offer their bodies as concrete proof of their conviction of the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, and as a sign of their love for Him who did not spare even His own Son for love of us?"