

CATHOLIC MINISTERS FOR CHURCH RENEWAL

P. O. Box 3054, Lynnwood, WA 98046

[www.catholicministers.org](http://www.catholicministers.org)

**STATEMENT ON CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE**

Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2010

The cascading charges of clergy sexual abuse greet us almost daily on the internet and television, and in our newspapers. The Vatican initially affirmed the mantle of victimhood, and chose to interpret this as a defamation of our church and our pope.

It is difficult to observe this saga without acknowledging the voices of people worldwide who bear heavy burdens not only because of the sins of some priests but also because of the failure of some bishops to put justice and compassion for victims ahead of issues of institutional face-saving and self-protection.

The real victims in this are the thousands who claim to have been abused and whose stories have been ignored or disregarded, while the alleged perpetrators have been allowed by the hierarchy to skirt justice and accountability.

What is at stake is not sex or sexual abuse. What is at stake is unchecked power.

The choice was made of leadership to avoid transparency and to protect the institution rather than the lives of those who have been harmed. While zero tolerance for priest abusers in this country has become the norm, the worldwide tolerance for bishops who have disregarded or moved abusers or silenced the abused is intolerable.

Here in our archdiocese, we have been fortunate to have an archbishop who has spent countless hours with abuse victims, and who has consistently and ably implemented both national and archdiocesan guidelines for dealing with abuse.

It is generally acknowledged that Vatican procedures improved in 2001 when John Paul II put Cardinal Ratzinger in charge of reviewing case files as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Yet, questions abound, begging answers - such as:

- Why is the Cardinal Archbishop of Ireland still in office when he was not only involved in a failure to act but was an active agent in a cover up?
- While archbishop of Munich did Joseph Ratzinger, through oversight or negligence, play a role in failing to respond to a now well documented priest abuse situation?
- Why was Cardinal Law the only U.S. bishop to resign because of this crisis; and why was he then given a sinecure in Rome?
- Why has no action been taken on two of the four Irish bishops who offered resignations, as a result of the notorious Murphy Report in that country?

A sad pattern of this dispiriting tale is that where and when the abuse scandals emerged, they emerged without the aid of the church hierarchy. In our country, lawsuit after lawsuit uncovered the horrendous stories. Church officials worldwide have not been in front of these stories. Late in responding, they have lost credibility. Taking the legal path, obfuscating the truth,

and doing everything to protect perpetrators as well as the church's reputation and treasury have failed to serve anyone.

Any institution, of course, has the right to guard against unfair accusations, but the failure to openly confront alleged wrongdoings compounds the hurt of victims and endangers the trust of both the members of our church and of the wider public.

An episcopal culture that placed defense of the structures over the defense of children is wrong, and requires conversion and repentance. But God's people, hungry for authenticity and trust, will believe conversion to be genuine only when the structures of our church's culture, which have sustained this abuse, are corrected.

Sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the Second Vatican Council called us to be a church that honors the baptism of each of its members, a church in which roles differ but in which responsibility is shared, a church in which power and authority are shaped by humble service after the model of Jesus Christ, a church that esteems honesty and places a high value on openness and accountability, a church that owns its pilgrim status - admitting to failures while seeking to be a place of grace.

The Vatican is now faced with the challenge of undertaking the painful self-examination and institutional reforms needed to rid us of our clerical culture and to help us reclaim the faithfulness of our mission. Such reforms will be a graced opportunity to model just action, vulnerability, and humility before our God.

Basic elements of these reforms include:

- The need for our leaders worldwide to come clean about the breadth and depth of the crisis. Transparency is required.
- The need to be accountable, especially with regard to bishops who have persisted in their refusal to accept accountability for failure in supervising problem priests.
- The need to empower the laity with real responsibility in decision making and church governance. Our laity, educated and hungry for spiritual nourishment, expect to be treated by their spiritual leaders as equals, not in a condescending way.
- The need for an apology from the Holy Father to victims of abuse worldwide and to the universal church and society for the harm done by abusive priests and church leaders who tolerated such action.

Conversion for the institution is as needed as conversion for individuals. The former is always harder to embrace.

As we move to Pentecost, our prayer - which we prayed for the three years prior to the Council - is that of Blessed Pope John XXIII: "O Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in our day, and bring a new Pentecost."

Email Contact: [info@catholicministers.org](mailto:info@catholicministers.org)

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