

Abuse report offers clarity, inspires resolve

Often when the Catholic Church's sexual abuse crisis is discussed, some defender of the Church will accurately point out that no other institution has done more to study itself and to create safeguards that protect children in the area of sexual abuse. While this may indeed be the case, it should not be a cause for congratulations. Instead our efforts should be seen as our willing acceptance of our responsibility to do what we can to protect children.

In 2002, when the light had been shined on this dark place in our Church, the U.S. Bishops gathered to address the crisis that had emerged and to prevent the causes of it from ever again threatening our children, the priesthood and the inexorable goodness within the Catholic Church. Out of that gathering came the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," a landmark document that affirmed our deep commitment to creating a safe environment within the Church for children and youth and sought to repair the badly damaged trust between the Catholic Church and its members.

The Charter, among other things, called for two studies on the issue of clergy sexual abuse in the United States. The John Jay College of Criminal Justice conducted both studies;

- The first, "The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002," was completed in 2004.
- And earlier this week, the results of the second study, "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002," were released.

While the 2004 Nature and Scope study revealed the truth and disturbing breadth of sexual abuse in our Church - 4 percent of priests were accused of abuse from 1950-2002, it was equally important for us to understand the root causes for the prevalence of sexual abuse in our Church and to examine it against the backdrop of

the rest of society.

The report released this week, which can be viewed in its entirety at usccb.org, draws many interesting conclusions about the causes and context of abuse in the Church. Included among them is the finding that there is no single “cause” of sexual abuse by priests, dismissing both celibacy and homosexuality – frequently speculated as contributing factors – as causes.

It also confirms that the rise in abuse cases in the 1960s and 1970s – the period when the vast majority of abuse cases occurred – was “consistent with the rise in other types of ‘deviant’ behavior [occurring at the same time in American society], such as drug use and crime, as well as changes in social behavior, such as an increase in pre-marital sexual behavior and divorce.”

While it may be comforting for some to learn that there is nothing intrinsic in our Church or its make-up that contributes to the presence of sexual abuse, it does not mitigate the damaging effects of sexual abuse that did occur in our Church.

Though the report finds that “the ‘crisis’ of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests is a historical problem,” we know that sexual abuse has not been completely eradicated from our Church or from our society. We have the responsibility to protect children entrusted to our care and we must be ever vigilant in our efforts to prevent any incident of sexual abuse. Nothing can weaken our resolve to rid our Church of anyone who would harm children.

This is the motivation for us here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore as we rigorously implement and enforce those policies and procedures aimed at achieving these critical goals. Mandatory reporting of abuse to civil authorities, strict background checks and screenings (more than 75,000 to-date), training and education for employees and volunteers tougher screening and formation for prospective priests, age-specific education for the children in our schools and religious education programs, meaningful outreach and healing for victims, and the integral involvement of an independent board serving as our “check and balance” in reviewing our handling of such cases are just a few of the steps we have taken to earn and maintain the trust of God’s people.

After the painful revelations of the sexual abuse crisis, the only greater sin our Church could commit would be a failure to follow the very policies and procedures we have in place to protect children and root out abusers. And that can never happen.