

‘Substantial evolution:’ Bishop Parker shares observations on response to abuse crisis

Events in the summer of 2018 brought the scandal of child sexual abuse in the church again into the public consciousness. Revelations of allegations of sexual misconduct and child sexual abuse by former Washington Archbishop Theodore McCarrick and his subsequent removal from the College of Cardinals were followed in August by the release of a Pennsylvania grand jury report alleging abuse of more than 1,000 children by about 300 priests over the course of several decades.

Archbishop William E. Lori and his auxiliary bishops in Baltimore celebrated Masses around the archdiocese, talking extensively with congregants after Masses. The archdiocese also conducted 17 listening sessions with various constituencies, including parishioners in the pew. A “virtual town hall” generated more than 7,000 comments.

One of the auxiliaries, Bishop Adam J. Parker, vicar general and moderator of the curia for the archdiocese, attended most of the sessions and spoke with the Catholic Review about the impact of listening to the faithful. Excerpts (edited for space and clarity) from the interview follow.

Q. What are you hearing from the people?

Certainly, a lot of concern. There is anger, there’s confusion, there’s bewilderment. I think probably the prevailing sentiment has been: We thought we had this fixed almost two decades ago. How is it that we got back here today? And people are wondering: Has the problem been fixed or is it still occurring today? ...

Certainly, with the Pennsylvania grand jury report, there is a feeling, even a perception, ... that abuse happened in the very recent past when, in fact, that report detailed allegations and incidents of abuse going back some 70 years. Even in the state of Pennsylvania, the number of abuse cases since 2002 is very, very small.

I'm happy to say that is likewise true here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Of the clergy abuse that we know of today, in the last 25 years, we have seen current incidents of clergy abuse drop precipitously. Even one case is too many, but our child protection efforts are working and we must remain vigilant.

Q. How do you answer people who say that the church and especially the bishops aren't doing enough to prevent and address child sexual abuse in the church?

It's important to look at our recent past and how handling of allegations occurs today. Things are different. There has been a substantial evolution in handling allegations.

What we do here in the archdiocese today is largely predicated upon the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Thanks to our leadership here in the archdiocese, even prior to the charter we have been handling these allegations in a particular way.

The first thing we do when an allegation of child sexual abuse comes in is to report it to civil authorities. That's been the law here in the state of Maryland for over 25 years now and we comply with that law. So, even if a person comes to us and they're already an adult, we still report that, as prescribed by Maryland law. That then gives the civil authorities their opportunity to do an investigation and we likewise conduct our own internal investigation. ...

Unless there is an immediate and very substantial reason to rule out any allegation that comes forward against a priest, we remove that priest immediately from ministry, if he is still active. In fact, that happened earlier this year where a person came forward with an allegation dating back to the 1970s. As soon as we received the information about that allegation, we reported it to civil authorities and did our initial investigation, but also immediately removed the priest from ministry. A significant component of that removal from ministry is our public disclosure that the priest has been suspended and why. ...

A main reason we make those allegations public is we understand that many victim-survivors have a difficult time coming forward, understandably, especially if they believe that they might be the only one.

When we make a public disclosure about allegations, it gives other potential victim-survivors the opportunity to know that they are not alone and that they can and should come forward to us. The other thing we do with victim-survivors when an allegation is made, we initially and immediately offer them an apology on behalf of the church and the archdiocese. We also offer them counseling and they can go to a counselor of their own choosing at the expense of the archdiocese. We offer counseling for as long as it takes for their own healing, which for many, if not most, is over the course of many years.

Q. Does that same process apply if the allegation is against a lay employee or a volunteer at a parish or school?

That's correct, and I'm glad you brought that up, because it does happen and there have been allegations within the last 25 years, in fact much more recently, with regard to lay employees and volunteers. So, the problem, regrettably, is not completely finished and it's certainly not isolated to clergy.

We have a safe environment training process here in the archdiocese, ... and it is required by anyone who would volunteer or be employed or be ordained here in the archdiocese. We want to create environments for our young people that are absolutely as safe as they can possibly be.

We believe that training has been effective. ... We have seen the incidents of clerical sexual abuse decrease substantially since the 1970s and 1980s. ... I would say that what we receive today, by way of reports into our office, would largely fall under that broad category you would call boundary violations or violations of our own archdiocesan code of conduct. ...

Q. In your meetings with victim-survivors, what do you hear about their pain?

What I've learned is that healing is a lifelong struggle and most significantly that the healing process is not linear in terms of progress. In other words, it's not like they are better today than they were yesterday and they're going to be better tomorrow than they are today. It doesn't work that way for most, if not all, victim-survivors. Sometimes they may have a period where they're making great progress but at times there are setbacks. And certainly, seeing the incidence of child sexual abuse

by clergy in the news would be something that, for many, does trigger a setback.

So, the healing doesn't occur in a short period of time. It's a lifelong journey. It doesn't occur in a linear fashion. But one of the things that I have learned from many of the victim-survivors I've met with is that healing is, in fact, possible.

And so much do we want that healing to occur that we offer the counseling for those victim-survivors so that they can have the opportunity to process, with a professional, what has happened to them and achieve some measure of healing and also hopefully spiritual renewal in their lives.

Q. Are other policies coming that help promote bishop accountability?

With regard to the archdiocese, you may have heard that in the November meeting of the U.S. bishops, there was a proposal that was on the table to provide some measure of accountability for bishops. ... We didn't have the opportunity to vote on those measures, as the Vatican intervened just the day before the meeting started.

But when we finished the meeting, there was so much discouragement by many bishops - certainly including the four of us bishops here in Baltimore - that we decided we didn't want to wait for those measures to be put into place, whether it would occur in a few months or even longer.

Archbishop Lori decided to do something right now. He decided we would enhance our current third-party reporting mechanism such that any allegations that would come forward against one of us bishops of the Archdiocese of Baltimore would not be processed through our typical reporting mechanism, but would go straight to the head of our Independent Review Board that reviews our cases of child sexual abuse and to a second member of that review board as well.

Q. Will we ever get to the point where we can say the church and the bishops have done all they can?

As I mentioned, here in the archdiocese and in the United States, there has been a major decline in current incidents of abuse since 2002. We can never, though, be complacent about that or in any way lessen our vigilance because this type of thing can happen at any time. ...

The single greatest asset that we have in terms of handling these allegations now would be the lay involvement among the team members that we have – both our internal (archdiocesan) team, which is comprised entirely of lay members except for me; and also our Independent Review Board, which is entirely lay, save for one pastor who sits on the board – that lay involvement has really changed the tide here in the past two-and-a-half decades since the board here was founded.

Bishops are acting in different ways today in regard to handling this than they were. I don't know how that evolution may continue over the coming years, but I expect that it will, as our understanding of this sin, of this scourge, continues to evolve.

What our people want from us is transparency. They want to know that we're reaching out to victim-survivors and providing measures of healing and they want to know that those who are being formed for priesthood today are being formed in healthy ways so that we don't see a repeat of what occurred in decades past.

Q. In light of all that, do you see reason to hope?

I see great reason to hope. I think we are at the forefront here in this archdiocese of this issue nationwide. ... I think that all dioceses are much, much further ahead than we were in decades past. ... In fact, so much hope do I have that I think that we as a Catholic Church can actually be a leader for other institutions, other organizations, even other religious denominations in addressing and preventing child sexual abuse.

Bishop Parker was featured on the Catholic Baltimore radio program, discussing the archdiocesan response to the sexual abuse crisis. Listen to the full interview below.

For more information, visit www.archbalt.org/accountability