

Yesteryear's standards look different in today's light

Growing up, my family always had at least one station wagon. With 10 children, there was no other way to transport the family. None of the various Chevys that hauled us and our paraphernalia had official "seats" for more than nine, so we often sat on laps or folded down the seat in the back, where several sat in the flat area. I'm sure there were lap belts in the car, but shoulder belts weren't standard and child safety seats were not on the radar.

By today's safety rules, a family of 12 would need an extended van or two large SUVs, but the Guntys did OK, according to the standards of the day.

That's the key: "According to the standards of the day."

We should have had all the children in car seats, and larger passengers should have been using a three-point shoulder harness, but we cannot go back in time. Neither can we single out Chevy and say it should have known better than other car manufacturers and installed these devices, but not apply those standards to Ford or Dodge.

In some ways, that's what's happening today. Society has learned a lot about sexual abuse of children and teens in recent decades, yet many try to apply today's standards to the 1970s and '80s. Then, those who abused minors were considered flawed and sick. Criminologists and psychologists believed treatment was the appropriate way to handle abusers, who in theory could then be successfully returned to the community.

We know better now, of course. We have harsh penalties for offenders, and those who work with children are required to report suspected abuse to civil authorities. The church has gone further than most other organizations to implement measures to protect children and young people by training tens of thousands of ministers, teachers, catechists, employees and volunteers in abuse prevention and identification.

Recent revelations in Europe rehash the angst we in the church in the United States endured earlier this decade, regarding clergy sexual misconduct and the response of some church administrators. As Pope Benedict XVI told victims in a March 20 letter to the people of Ireland, "You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry. I know that nothing can undo the wrong you have endured. Your trust has been betrayed and your dignity has been violated."

We cannot go back in time and apply what we know now to how we understood the abuse that happened years ago. As we have improved safety for children and other passengers in cars, so have we improved our ways of keeping children safe from sexual predators.

Granted, packing a few extra children into a Chevy station wagon without enough seat belts is not the same as exposing children to abuse at the hands of church personnel who were entrusted to minister to them. At the same time, it is not fair for some to single out the church for distinct recrimination or retribution. Public schools and governmental agencies have had abusers within their ranks, but have not done as much to respond; however, they are often protected from media scorn, and regulation as well. That's like targeting one carmaker for not having shoulder harnesses 40 years ago, but letting others off the hook.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore urges victims of abuse to come forward so they can be offered pastoral counseling and be put on a path to healing. The archdiocesan office of Child and Youth Protection notes on its Web page: "No one credibly accused of child sexual abuse is in any ministry in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Anyone who knows of or suspects child abuse by a priest, employee or volunteer of the Archdiocese should contact the Archdiocese at 1-866-417-7469, as well as the appropriate State authorities."

The more we learn about keeping children safe, whether in a car, or from sexual predators in any situation, the better off we all are.

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