

## SNAP IN THE CROSSHAIRS

*Thomas Doyle*

*March 7, 2017*

SNAP is well known by sex abuse survivors throughout the world. It's also well known by those who still believe the clergy abuse phenomenon is a gross exaggeration that is primarily about harming the Church.

SNAP was started by Barbara Blaine in 1988. Barbara is a survivor of sexual violation by a priest whom she and her family trusted. She was violated as a pre-teen. By the time she was a young woman the scars were still as painful as ever. Barbara started SNAP as a support group for other survivors because, as she herself has said, "No one else would help so we had to help ourselves."

Barbara was dead right. I have been involved with survivors since 1984. I have heard many ... more than I can count ... tell their sad and shocking stories. All were from devout Catholic families and naturally turned to the Church for help, but to their added shock they found they were being ignored, lied to, threatened into silence and in general treated as if they had some sort of communicable disease. Barbara Blaine experienced this and had the courage to stand up rather than stay a victim.

SNAP grew steadily because the number of victims increased when the media began actually covering it and not burying it. SNAP and the LINKUP were the only places victims could go for support. The Church was no help. In fact, when victims got involved with the Church, even to a minor degree, they almost always ended up being re-traumatized.

By the nineties, SNAP members were not just sitting in rooms listening to each other's stories. They were organizing for a purpose: to get the attention of the bishops and the institutional church. Sex abuse by clerics was far more widespread than anyone imagined and certainly far, far worse than the Church spokespersons claimed.

This was not a few bad apples, a passing problem, or a temporary nuisance. This was the uncovering of the worst crisis the institutional Catholic Church had faced in at least a thousand years, and it was not from the outside but from within.

The institutional Catholic Church responded to the victims of abuse by its own clerics (including bishops and cardinals) in a manner that shocked, angered and scandalized not only the victims but countless others. The official Church's highest and really only priority was self-preservation and the institutional image. The often-used term "the good of the church" really meant the good of the bishops.

The victims would have been trampled underfoot and left in the dust had it not been for Barbara Blaine, Dave Clohessy, and the other courageous founders and leaders of SNAP.

Needless to say, SNAP wasn't high on the list of favorites for a lot of people, especially the bishops. SNAP members got in their faces, openly criticized them, called them out for hiding predators, and condemned their duplicitous words and actions. They wrote letters, held press conferences, demonstrated and, most important, gave other victims courage to come out of the shadows.

Here was this little group of people with no money and no political connections facing off with the Catholic bishops of the United States. In spite of the impossible odds and the massive power imbalance, they made headway.

Why? Because they were right and the Church was wrong.

Now, SNAP is in the crosshairs. As most know, a former employee has filed a lawsuit that makes several allegations and in general tries to portray SNAP as a deceptive, dishonest criminal enterprise. The plaintiff makes a number of serious accusations in her complaint, but they really are aimed at SNAP's top national leaders and not the organization. She departed SNAP four years ago and now has decided to file a lawsuit.

Her contention that SNAP was actually a cover for an elaborate system involving steering victims to attorneys who in turn paid it kickbacks is ludicrous. Victims from all over the world call SNAP leaders, especially the national leaders, all the time and a common request is for the name of a lawyer.

SNAP is far more than the national offices, which consists of a handful of people. In reality the organization is a collection of local chapters each with its own leadership. Most direct contact with victims happens on the local level because that's where the SNAP membership is.

When responding to requests for lawyers, the SNAP policy always has been to respond to with three names or more. I also have gotten plenty of requests for help in finding a lawyer. (I gave up recommending victims to their local diocesan headquarters because I learned that this was not only useless but also counter-productive.) I recommend the names of attorneys in the area where the person lives ... if more than one lawyer is available, I give them contact points for all. I have never acted as an intermediary between a victim and a specific attorney. Instead I suggest they contact the attorney themselves.

On many occasions, I am asked to connect the person to a specific attorney, and the number one name on the list is Jeff Anderson. I always explain that if they are looking to get Jeff Anderson, they need to know that he does not practice in every State in the union nor can he possibly take every case that comes his way. If someone wants Jeff's phone number or that of anyone else, I give it.

That's how the SNAP leaders operate too. I don't get any royalties or kickbacks, nor does SNAP.

It's true that attorneys have donated money to SNAP over the years. *Forbes Magazine* wrote an article about this a few years ago and tried to make it sound like the practice was immoral, unethical, illegal, or all three—and in fact it is none of the above.

People ask for specific attorneys like Jeff Anderson because he is known worldwide and, most important, he is known to be a very compassionate and caring man. I've known him since 1989 and he is in fact caring and compassionate besides being a brilliant attorney. To even dream that he has some sort of backroom deal with SNAP is not only lunacy but also an insult to his intelligence. He and the other attorneys who do the bulk of the sex abuse cases are not stupid. To get engaged in a kickback scheme would be stupid and, worse, it would be professionally suicidal.

SNAP has incurred the wrath of a lot of bishops and a lot of devout lay Catholics. Why? One of the more obvious reasons given is that SNAP appears to attack the Church and it never lets people forget that the "problem" is still with us. The bishops and a lot of lay people would like to see SNAP suddenly disappear into the mist—but not just SNAP: all victims and their supporters.

SNAP and the victims are a major threat to the equilibrium and to the secure image projected by the institutional Catholic Church. Shaking up the security people have in their Church, especially one that promises them salvation in exchange for obedience, docility and generosity, is bound to generate a hostile response.

Much of the hostility, anger and denial generated by the clergy abuse issue is grounded in the unwillingness to accept the reality that the Church and its clergy aren't as perfect as people expect them to be.

One adult woman I knew, a victim of rape by a priest at twelve, put it succinctly: "Clergy abuse has destroyed the security we had that the priests would tell us everything we needed to do and to know. Now, we have to take charge of our own spirituality and be adult Catholics. That's hard."

Much of the angry rhetoric comes in the form of accusations that victims are dissenters from doctrine or that they are pushing anti-orthodox agendas (e.g., birth control, ordination of women). The most common accusation is that SNAP, the victims, and anyone on their side is attacking the Church.

Most victims could care less about Church teachings. They are interested in honesty and justice, two commodities in short supply in the institutional Church. The sexual violation of minors or adults and the lying and cover-up by bishops has nothing to do with orthodoxy, dissent or belief in official dogmas. It has everything to do with betrayal by the trusted clergy. But most important, it's about the violation of the bodies and souls of the vulnerable.

Sex abuse by clergy has been around since the beginning of the Catholic Church. The institutional Church, i.e., the hierarchy, has controlled the responses to victims throughout the centuries. Until now, that is.

When Barbara started SNAP 30 years ago, she and the original members knew they were on their own and that they were up against the largest religious organization on earth, with more money, resources, power and influence than they could ever imagine. But they knew sex abuse was wrong and covering it up and lying to victims was far worse.

They didn't have any of the resources the official church had, but they knew two things: One, they had truth ... what happened to them was real, it was deeply wrong, and that was the truth. Second, they knew that the Church didn't

stop with priests and bishops. The victims were just as much “the Church” as the college of cardinals and the pope. In the eyes of Christ, everyone was on a level playing field.

So, the fundamental difference between victims now and victims 300 years ago is this: Today’s victims have taken charge of their own destiny. They are determining the course of the sex abuse nightmare. They are working to protect children today and in the future. They are in charge, not the bishops or their lawyers and not even the pope.

The fact that there have been so many grand juries, state-sponsored investigations (e.g., Ireland, England, Australia), criminal convictions and civil judgments is evidence that the official Church is no longer in control. If the Church government had been able to sidetrack all of these it would have, but this time around the bishops just don’t have the horses.

I can’t comment on many of the detailed accusations in the plaintiff’s complaint because they are about a lawsuit from Missouri that was active a few years ago which I know little about. The allegations are also about a number of individual incidents that appear to have taken place between her and the two top leaders of SNAP but certainly not the full organization.

However, I can comment on two issues, one that appears in the complaint and the other that has been in the news coverage.

David Clohessy and Barbara Blaine have resigned their positions at SNAP. Some news reports have alleged there is a connection between the lawsuit and the resignations. A couple of commentators on the events have pronounced that both have resigned in disgrace because of the lawsuit. The only source of information any of them have is from the complaint itself. In fact, David had planned on resigning in 2016, before anyone knew about the suit. Barbara planned her departure before the suit was known, and it was only by coincidence that it was announced at the same time the suit was announced. Both of them had been on the front lines for three decades and well deserved a break from the non-stop stress of their positions.

The other accusation made against SNAP is that its primary goal is to hurt the Catholic Church. They don’t need to hurt the Church. The Church does a better job of hurting itself than anyone could possibly do.

SNAP has been accused of “Catholic-bashing” by just about everyone who disagrees with it or is threatened by it. Exposing worldwide sexual abuse by clergy and cover-up by bishops is not Catholic bashing. It is telling the truth and exposing an entire culture of sex abuse that is diametrically opposed to everything the Catholic Church stands for.

Those who persist in believing that the victims’ real agenda is combatting Church teaching on various sexual issues are wildly delusional.

The accusation itself is senseless if you think about it for a minute. Consider the bottom line. On one side, we have the Roman Catholic Church, which has the most stringent sexual/morality policies of any religion on earth and teaches that every kind of sexual activity, with the exception of procreative sex by married partners, is mortally sinful—and also insists that these policies can’t even be discussed. On the other side, we have the Church’s leadership exposed for enabling and hiding clerics who have perpetrated the vilest of sexual acts, the molestation of children and the vulnerable. Does that configuration perhaps have some semblance to institutionalized hypocrisy?

Those who claim the victims and SNAP are out to “get the Church” obviously either don’t know or they reject a basic teaching of ecclesiology: The Church is the People of God, not just the clergy, the hierarchy, the devout who are at Mass every Sunday, or those who agree with every teaching and doctrine. The Church also is the victims, their parents, their spouses, and those who try to help them. It’s those who disagree with one or the other teaching or practice, and those who see the layers of institutional corruption, inaction, and narcissism.

It’s pretty obvious there are plenty of people who don’t know the difference between the clerical establishment, the church’s governmental system and the People of God.

SNAP is down right now but it’s far from out. It’s made up of too many brave, committed and courageous people who are in it because they want the Church to be what it’s supposed to be: a true, living Christian community and not a gilded kingdom for the privileged or the nostalgic.