

Church needs to act on sex abuse

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Pope Benedict XVI last week lamented his “deep shame” over the clergy sex-abuse scandal, decrying the “enormous pain” that individuals and communities have suffered from “gravely immoral behavior” by priests. He vowed to “do what is possible so this cannot happen again in the future.”

Do what is possible?

Not one bishop has been removed from office because of his own complicity, collusion or cover-up of the church’s continuing sexual-abuse problems. Nor has anyone been forced to resign for violating Canon Law or criminal or civil laws.

Even when the Archdiocese of Boston imploded in 2002, church authorities were quick to say former Archbishop Bernard Law’s resignation had nothing to do with his leadership style.

Do what is possible?

Some bishops in their own dioceses continue to fight the release of records, even the names and locations of known predators, in their episcopal jurisdictions. The Portland, Oregon, Archdiocese has been dribbling records out to the public as recently as last week while the Archdiocese of Los Angeles continues to oppose releasing its thousands of files.

Rest assured that the institutional church’s loud protestations of commitment to victims of sexual abuse in the future offer neither absolution nor justice for the sins and the crimes of the past.

The “scandal” that attaches to the church’s sexual abuse problems is that there was, in fact, a cover-up of unimaginable proportions that aided and abetted the continued sexual abuse and molestation of thousands of children, as well as young men, women and vulnerable adults.

Do what is possible?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has hailed diocesan programs across the country celebrating this month as Child Abuse Awareness Month. “We can never rest when it comes to protecting children and teenagers,” said Bishop Gregory Aymond, chairman of the conference’s Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People.

However, Catholic conferences and church lobbyists in such states as Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Colorado and Ohio have been ruthless in their opposition to the complete removal of statutes of limitation regarding the sexual abuse of minors.

Superior Court Judge Robert B. Young ruled last Wednesday that Delaware’s Child Victims Act does not violate the state constitution, based on the fact that federal courts already have set a precedent for upholding similar laws. The act was passed in 2007 to eliminate the civil statute of limitations for child-sexual abuse and to allow a two-year window during which previously barred suits could be filed.

Removing statutes of limitations is the single most effective method of holding sexual predators – and any possibly complicit or enabling individuals or institutions – accountable along with the inclusion of “window legislation” such as Delaware’s to bring forth previously time-barred cases of abuse.

I love my church, and together with Pope Benedict XVI I am ashamed, deeply ashamed of what has been done to children in God’s name. I fully expect my church leadership to initiate actions that more faithfully follow their words.

This is possible.

Anything less is “sounding brass and tinkling cymbals” (1 Corinthians 13:1-2) because words without action remain hollow.