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LOSING FAITH IN THE CLERGY - BRONX PRIEST'S HOLLOW WORDS GLOSS OVER SEX SCANDAL

By Rod Dreher

THE pastor at St. Simon Stock Church in The Bronx told Mass-goers yesterday that allegations of sex abuse by their former priests was taken "very seriously" from the start.

Father Michael Kissane told me he also let parishioners know that his "door is always open" to talk about the matter, which was revealed in The Post on Saturday.

Fine. But if anyone in that parish has information about the alleged abuse - which has been denied by the four **priests** named in the suit - they'd be better off going to the media or the plaintiffs lawyer rather than the church.

We Catholics are people of great faith, but it is asking too much for us to believe that the church has taken this matter "very seriously."

If that were true, why did the Carmelites and the archdiocese send three of the accused priests to work in other parishes, where they would have access to children and teenagers?

"It's absolutely reprehensible in this day and age that these men who have serious allegations against them are put out in pastoral care," says psychiatrist Richard Sipe, a nationally known authority on priest sexual abuse.

If church authorities take the matter "very seriously," why are they not putting out a call asking those with information that could clear these priests - or help the victim get the justice he deserves - to come forward?

Could it be that they take it "very seriously" not for pastoral reasons, but for legal ones?

If so, they had better worry. Father Ruben Rodriguez, the church's former pastor, has now undermined the defense's claim that he and the other three **priests** are innocent.

Father Rodriguez, who was reached in Puerto Rico by phone by The Post's Douglas Montero, portrayed himself as an innocent framed by his erstwhile Carmelite colleague, Father James Tamburrino.

He claimed Father Tamburrino is smearing him as punishment for trying to break up the unusual relationship Father Tamburrino had with the boy.

Father Rodriguez is the only one of the four we know to have been sent for psychiatric evaluation - something required by archdiocesan guidelines when the church believes sexual misconduct allegations have some substance. This bears on his credibility.

Still, Father Rodriguez told The Post he learned that Father Tamburrino had been disciplined in Peru for sexual misconduct with an underage parishioner - an allegation also made in the plaintiff's lawsuit.

If Father Rodriguez is telling the truth, it would appear that the Carmelites knew they had a priest with a sex problem on their hands, yet assigned him anyway to the Bronx parish.

Did they?

Furthermore, if Father Rodriguez had reason to suspect something improper going on, did he not have a moral, and possibly legal, obligation to inform his superiors?

Now that the case has hit the public square, it is expected that church lawyers will move to have a gag order issued.

The public may never find out what really happened at St. Simon Stock parish, what the Carmelites knew, when they knew it, and whom they told. The church is not just the clergy; it's lay people, too. And we deserve better.

"Silence remains a tremendously important goal of the church on every level," says Sipe. "The important thing is not paying out the money. The important thing is keeping it under wraps."

But these questions cannot and must not go away. The people of St. Simon Stock parish deserve answers, as do all New York Catholics.

Edward Cardinal Egan cannot credibly ask the laity for more money to help the financially strapped archdiocese with this sort of thing hanging over his head.

The faithful must have confidence that the church is taking strong action to stop the problem. Million-dollar payouts buying the silence of victims without public accounting for dark deeds only perpetuates the crisis.

"Keep after them," a New York priest told me after The Post first broke this story. "These people only care about their careers. They're destroying the priesthood. They're destroying the church."