



BARB ICKES
Viewpoint

The sins of the Father

The local bishop is correct when he says people looked at things differently in the 1950s and '60s.

Of course they did. But it's tough to imagine that parents of young boys who were fondled (or worse) by the family priest ever thought it was a good idea to let Father so-and-so back on the job.

And, certainly, by the time the 1980s rolled around, few people would have agreed to turn a proven pedophile loose on large groups of children.

For 40 years, Father James Janssen managed to stay in close contact with kids, even though church leaders had all sorts of evidence that he was inclined to sexually molest boys.

Bishop William Franklin of the Davenport Diocese, in a report released Wednesday, said Janssen first was disciplined for sexual misconduct in 1956.

Two years later, after getting treatment for his "spiritual" problem, Janssen was again accused. Still, a year later, he was sent to Davenport to serve at St. Mary's. It didn't take long for parents there to begin reporting the priest's "inappropriate behavior" with boys.

In 1980, despite multiple allegations of prior abuse, Janssen became the chaplain for, of all things, the Boy Scouts. Can you imagine a more poisonous partnership?

In 1988, more accusations came. The bishop's report shows that the diocese investigated the accusations and found evidence of Janssen victims in at least three churches. Still, he continued to serve for three more years and wasn't completely cut off from his priestly duties until 1996 — a full 40 years after the first allegations.

If it makes you feel any better, the bishop acknowledges in his report that, in retrospect, Janssen never should have been reassigned.

But the story is sickening.

Of the 65 known allegations of sexual molestation in the Davenport Diocese in the past 50 years, 39 of the charges were leveled against three priests. In other words, these men were not one-time offenders. In fact, 39 charges against three priests might even give the impression the molestation was easy for them.

Franklin and all the behind-the-scenes Catholics who have helped him sort through this horrible mess deserve credit. They've tackled a tough thing and their findings have been thorough and public.

But are they finished?

Franklin's proposed defrocking of five priests, including Janssen, is a serious and appropriate step. But what about the church leadership that allowed the sexual abuse to go on?

Should such radically poor judgment be overlooked? If the accusations against Janssen and the others could be proven, the police should have been notified.

Even in 1956, child molestation was a crime.

Janssen and others were simply reassigned — shipped off to another parish where parents didn't know they should keep an eye on their sons. Among the apologies in Wednesday's report is a comment by Franklin to the victims in his diocese: "It was not your fault."

The words may go a long way in healing, but they stopped short. The report might better have said: "It was not your fault. It was ours."

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Quad-City Times,
2/26/04, p. 4.