
Chapter Two: Historical Context

Until quite recently, the extent and effects of child sexual abuse in our society have been relatively unappreciated and unresearched. Usually, the abuse has been kept secret or known by only a few family members or close friends. Because the abuse is often not visible, most people have very little awareness of the serious trauma which sexual abuse causes in its victims. Moreover, while child sexual abuse in itself is both immoral and illegal, most persons do not recognize that it is often due to a psychological disorder, a compulsion or addiction which plagues the abuser also.

Today, the issue is beginning to be discussed more often in the open. In part, this is due to a new societal awareness of the value of children who are being valued more as human beings, as persons with rights and responsibilities. Many have attributed this new awareness to the influence of the U.N.-sponsored International Year of the Child in 1979. This new attitude has begun to influence our social policies. In the last fifteen years, for example, every state in the Union has passed mandatory reporting laws in regard to the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect of children. This legislation, along with media reports of instances of child sexual abuse and the formation of victim advocacy groups, has brought the issue to the attention of the public. However, as a society, we are only beginning to deal with it, and we still have much to learn.

This cultural context helps explain *why*, before 1983, very few cases of sexual misconduct with minors were reported to the Archdiocese and *how* the leaders of this local church responded to these reports. The cases that did arise before 1983 were handled by the Chancellor of the Archdiocese and the Archbishop, or the Vicar General. They were lumped together with other clinical problems, cases of financial misconduct, and other celibacy-related problems.

In 1983, Cardinal Bernardin established a Vicar for Priests' office. The Vicar's primary role was to be a pastor to the archdiocesan priests. The Cardinal chose Fr. Thomas Ventura as the first Vicar for Priests from a list of three names submitted by the priests themselves. He began with a brief job description, and no office or secretary. At first, priests approached him in confidence, primarily about vocational issues (leaving or returning to the

priesthood), stressful relationships in the rectory or among the pastoral staff, and requests for sabbaticals. As new allegations of priests' sexual misconduct with minors were reported, he dealt with these matters as well.

Because Fr. Ventura had no special training for this aspect of his ministry to priests, he sought the assistance of Drs. Richard Issel, James Cavanaugh, Jill Gardner, and Carroll Cradock for psychological input and Mr. James Serritella for legal advice. As the number of allegations increased, an Advisory Committee was formed in 1985 to assist the Vicar for Priests, consisting of Fr. James Roache, the Vicar General, Fr. Robert Kealy, the Chancellor, Dr. James Cavanaugh a psychiatrist with the Isaac Ray Center, and Mr. James Serritella, the archdiocesan attorney. This group, which initially met four times a year, helped the Vicar review the cases and develop standards of procedure.

In 1985, with the prompting of Mr. Serritella and the assistance of the new Chancellor, Fr. Robert Kealy, the Advisory Committee conducted a review of all priest personnel files in possession of the Chancellor's Office. The Committee discussed several cases which they found in the files and determined what needed to be done for further follow-up. They decided that all these cases should be put into the files of the Vicar for Priests so that he could monitor them. The Vicar, in turn, gave the Advisory Committee periodic reviews, updating them on specific cases. The Commission learned, however, that not all known cases were discussed by the Advisory Committee. At this time, the process was still rather informal and not followed consistently in each case.

Fr. Ventura began to deal with the victim and the victim's family, the parish, the Church as a whole, and the individual priest. In many cases, the family of the victim wanted the priest to get needed therapy but did not want to cause him harm. Most people wanted the minimum amount of publicity in these cases.

When an allegation arose about a priest, his pastor or the Vicar for Priests conducted interviews. Often, the accused denied the misconduct, a frequent initial response of child sexual abusers, as will be pointed out in the next chapter of this Report. At that time, there was a strong feeling that the accused has a right to his good name until the allegation was proven.

When an allegation was proven against a priest, he was removed from his position. The Vicar for Priests helped him get into professional diagnosis and treatment. Whether or not the priest was allowed to return to ministry depended, in part, on the reports of his therapists. Other criteria included the continuing use of medication, lack of access to children, and, in some but not in all cases, supervision by the pastor. Neither the school principal nor the parish council nor, in some cases, the pastor were informed about the priest's past history. While this practice may seem somewhat naive in terms of what we know today about sexual misconduct with minors, it seemed reasonable at the time when this behavior was viewed primarily as sinful and susceptible to correction by effort of the priest's will. There was inadequate awareness of the severity of the impact of the abuse on the victims and the inability of available therapy to cure the abusers.

On July 1, 1987, Fr. (now Bishop) Raymond Goedert succeeded Fr. Ventura as Vicar for Priests. In dealing with cases of sexual misconduct, he began to rely more and more on the services of the Isaac Ray Center at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Hospital. The Advisory Committee was reconstituted: Frs. Roache, Kealy, and Goedert. Mr. Serritella and staff from the Isaac Ray Center served as consultants to the committee. As the Vicar's workload increased, he asked that Fr. Andrew McDonagh be appointed to help him. During the past quarter century, Fr. McDonagh had worked with an archdiocesan committee which ministers to alcoholic priests and religious, their families, and their co-workers. In February, 1988, Fr. McDonagh began his tenure as a part-time associate in the Vicar for Priests' Office.

During Fr. Goedert's tenure, a more systematic approach was developed for dealing with cases of sexual misconduct with minors:

- (1) When an accusation was made against a priest, the Vicar first contacted the archdiocesan attorney to ascertain whether or not the alleged offense was reportable to civil authorities. If it was, the information was passed on immediately to the appropriate agency.
- (2) If there was potential for public scandal or litigation, the Vicar next reported the complaint to the Vicar General and, later, to the Advisory Committee.
- (3) The Vicar for Priests then contacted the person (usually a parent) making the accusation and invited the individual to meet with him, usually in the Vicar for Priests' Office. The Vicar took notes and read the story back to the person in order to ensure that the notes were accurate. He also asked the person to sign the pad on which he had taken the notes, verifying that they were accurate.
- (4) Then the Vicar called the accused priest in for an interview, usually meeting with him the same day he called him. After detailing the accusation, he asked the priest for a response. In cases where the accusation was later determined to be unfounded, the priests naturally denied the allegations. However, when sexual misconduct had occurred, many of the priests admitted their guilt, while trying to minimize the problem or denying the impropriety of what they had done. Some abusers, however, totally denied the accusation.
- (5) While the priest was still in his office, the Vicar set up a meeting in a day or two between the accused and the archdiocesan attorney who reported back to the Vicar after the interview. (The archdiocesan attorney was not the accused person's legal counsel.)
- (6) The priest was then sent to the Isaac Ray Center for an immediate, initial assessment. The Center reported back to the Vicar for Priests through the archdiocesan attorney. If the initial assessment revealed a problem, the Center also recommended the next step: usually full assessment and treatment on an outpatient or residential basis.
- (7) While the Cardinal made the final decision regarding whether the priest was eventually allowed to return to ministry, he relied on the Advisory Committee which based its recommendations on the priest's therapists' reports and the progress which he seemed to have made. The underlying intent was to rehabilitate the priest in order to return him to ministry. This was understandable, given the nature of the priesthood and the considerable investment of time and resources which the Archdiocese has in its priests. In retrospect, however, some members of the Advisory Committee told the Commission that they now think they were overly compas-

sionate and optimistic about the extent to which therapy could lessen the risks of future misconduct and additional victims.

In regard to these cases, Mr. Serritella, a nationally recognized legal expert on issues pertaining to Church and State, frequently recommended that, in responding to cases of sexual misconduct with minors, the Church do what it does best: Approach all involved — the victims, the victims' families, the parish communities, and the priests — in a pastoral, compassionate way. He recommended that the Archdiocese work primarily through its own pastorally oriented personnel, not through attorneys. He often advocated such preventative measures as in-service training for all archdiocesan personnel, including priests. He also consistently called for the removal from parish ministry of priests who had engaged in sexual misconduct with children or adolescents .

Through its interviews, the Commission learned that the archdiocesan Office of Catholic Education, the Office of Religious Education, and Catholic Charities, all of which are separate administrative entities, with the assistance of Mr. Serritella, developed policies and procedures in regard to child sexual abuse by their employees, have been consistent in implementing these policies and procedures, and have offered in-service training for all their personnel. In fact, there have been few cases of child sexual abuse by archdiocesan employees.

When allegations of sexual misconduct regarding priests arose, they were handled on a case-by-case basis. Archdiocesan policies and procedures were evolving which, while compassionate and pastoral, did not reflect a full understanding of the intractability of the problem. Moreover, in-service training about child abuse for priests has not yet taken place, although steps have been taken to remedy this next Fall. In a later chapter of this Report, we make recommendations regarding new, more effective policies and procedures for addressing the issue of sexual misconduct with minors by clergy.

The more immediate context for the establishment of this Commission arose last year. Father Patrick O'Malley succeeded Bishop Goedert as Vicar for Priests and inherited a growing workload of cases of sexual misconduct with minors. The Advisory Committee, which had begun to meet monthly,

began to meet twice a month, once each month with the Cardinal. The Archdiocese had moved from having no formal plan for dealing with such cases through various stages which were leading toward a more sophisticated plan. One case in particular persuaded Cardinal Bernardin to move more quickly and professionally to ensure that the Church's response would be appropriate and effective.

Last Spring, the Cardinal assigned a priest as pastor of a suburban parish. Accusations of sexual misconduct had been made against the priest several years ago, leading to his eventual removal from two parish assignments and entrance into therapy. In 1987, because the prognosis seemed positive, he was allowed to return to parish ministry. However, Cardinal Bernardin placed him under a "mandate" that he not be with anyone under 21 without an adult present. Again in 1990, the priest was evaluated at a clinic specializing in sexual disorders to ascertain if he would pose a risk to minors in a new assignment. The report indicated that he did not have pedophilic tendencies, and, in 1991, the new assignment was issued.

However, last July, it was learned that, not long after arriving in the parish, he had propositioned a young adult male for sex. He was immediately removed from the parish and sent to a residential treatment center. At first, his parishioners were simply told that he left the parish "for personal reasons." Last Fall, when they learned the real reason for his departure, and his past history about which they had not known, they were understandably angry. Media coverage of the story was intensive. And at the parish meeting in which the reason for his departure was disclosed, a young girl alleged that he had sexually molested her.

When these new allegations were made about the suburban pastor, Cardinal Bernardin decided to appoint this special Commission on which he could rely for expert advice. As mentioned above, the Commission, in turn, despite the expertise we brought to this task, has found this to be a significant learning process.

As the Commission began its work, the Advisory Committee was meeting much more frequently, at times on a daily basis. It was expanded to include Sister M. Brian Costello, the Cardinal's Chief of Staff, Dr. Carol Fowler, the Director of the archdiocesan

Department of Personnel Services, and Mr. Ralph Bonnacorsi, of the archdiocesan Office of Catholic Education and Executive Director of its Office of Conciliation. The Committee has continued to work with the Cardinal and the Vicar for Priests in regard to the cases about which this Commission has made recommendations.