

Sister Maureen Turlish, a Voice for Sex Abuse Victims, Dies at 79

By Sam Roberts

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Sister Maureen Paul Turlish, a tenacious advocate for survivors of childhood sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergymen, died on July 18 in Cincinnati. She was 79.

The cause was viral encephalitis, Paul Turlish, her brother and only immediate survivor, said.

While she had an abiding concern for children, articles in *The Boston Globe* and elsewhere beginning in 2002 that explored the abuse of minors by priests transformed her into one of the few religious sisters to publicly protest what she denounced as a “conspiracy, collusion and cover-up” by her church’s hierarchy.

“At the time, she was the only religious woman that would publicly stand up for this issue,” the Rev. Thomas P. Doyle, a canon lawyer and advocate for victims of clergy sexual abuse, was quoted as saying by her order, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Sister Maureen took to the picket line demanding compensation for victims and an extension of lapsed deadlines to prosecute predators and to lodge civil claims against them. She wrote letters to newspapers, initially under a pen name. She then abandoned anonymity as a founding member of the National Survivor Advocates Coalition and Catholic Whistleblowers.

Among the founders were other nuns, priests, former clerics, a monsignor and Father Doyle.

After the scandal began to spread in 2002, the Catholic Church in the United States instituted a zero-tolerance policy and imposed a number of programs to prevent further sexual abuse by priests.

In 2007, Sister Maureen and her fellow advocates successfully lobbied to lift the two-year statute of limitations on sexual abuse claims in Delaware and to eliminate time limits on civil suits and criminal penalties involving sexual abuse of children. The legislation generated more than 150 new claims and prompted the Diocese of Wilmington to declare bankruptcy.

Even as she denounced how the church had handled the scandal, Sister Maureen remained a committed, if disillusioned, Catholic. In an address in 2011 to dissident Catholics at Chestnut Hill College, a Catholic institution in Philadelphia, she said:

“No longer am I the person I used to be, even 10 or 12 years ago, and although I cannot compare my loss with the loss suffered by victims of childhood sexual abuse, there is, nevertheless, loss.”

She added: “Something has been taken from me, as it has been taken from every member of the people of God. A part of me has died.”

Maureen Anne Turlish was born in Philadelphia on July 5, 1939 to Paul and Mary (Dunn) Turlish. Her mother worked in a South Philadelphia brewery. Her father was president of Local 6 of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers Union and died of a heart attack at the bargaining table in 1975.

She was 9 years old when she took her first turn on the picket line, joining her father during a strike at the Good & Plenty candy factory, she recalled. Her first exposure to the Sisters of Notre Dame was through her art teacher in high school. Her father insisted that she wait until she was 21 before becoming a nun.

After working as a secretary at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, she entered a convent in Maryland in 1960 and took her vows in 1963. She added the name Paul in memory of her father.

Sister Maureen earned a bachelor's degree in education from Trinity College in Washington (now Trinity Washington University) in 1965 and a master's in art education from the University of Maryland. She became an art teacher and headed the fine arts department at St. Elizabeth High School in Wilmington.

She had retired from teaching and, until being injured in an automobile accident this year, was living at her order's Mount Notre Dame campus in Cincinnati, where she was caring for elderly nuns.

In 2003, galvanized by the growing outcry over sexual abuse by priests and the church's hesitant early response but reluctant to go public, she wrote several letters to The New York Times under the name Sister M. Immaculata Dunn from Valley Forge, Pa., according to Robert Hoatson, a former priest and a member of Catholic Whistleblowers.

(Mr. Hoatson's disclosure contradicted a correction published by The Times later that year that quoted Catholic officials in Pennsylvania as saying that the letter-writer as named was not a nun.)

One "Sister Immaculata" letter expressed doubt that church leaders had the will to remove priests who were pedophiles or had sexually abused women, including nuns.

"The church was going nuts about it because they couldn't find Sister M. Immaculata Dunn," Mr. Hoatson said in Global Sisters Report, a project of the newspaper The National Catholic Reporter.

Established to support whistle-blowers and victims of sexual abuse, the group pressed to open diocesan files on abuse cases, remove bishops who obstructed justice and organize a global conference of survivors and church leaders.

"What is truly blasphemous and should be deeply offensive to all," Sister Maureen said in her speech at Chesnut Hill College, "is that so many children could have been spared a lifetime of agony brought on by sexual abuse but for the callous behavior of enabling church officials who shuffled sexual predators around with abandon, instead of calling the police."

In 2008, she wrote on BishopAccountability.org, which documents the church scandal and advocates for victims, "The sexual abuse of a child by a minister, priest or any religious figure is the most heinous and reprehensible of crimes, and it is called incest for good reason when it occurs in what is often described as the Family of God, the Church."

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