News



Journalists watch a live feed of the Nov. 12 fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)



by Dan Morris-Young

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At a time when the U.S. bishops are in the crosshairs of scrutiny and scorn over their handling of clerical sexual abuse, psychologist Thomas Plante admits that at times he is viewed as a shill for them when he lays out the facts of the U.S. clerical abuse landscape since the prelates' high-profile 2002 gathering in Dallas.

According to the Santa Clara University professor, the initiatives that grew from that meeting — notably the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, canonical Essential Norms related to the charter, a National Review Board, and diocesan compliance audits — have contributed to "barely a trickle" of new clerical child sexual abuse cases since 2002.

"If there are holes that need to be plugged to keep kids safe in the church and to keep those with predilections for children out of ministry, then let's find them and plug them to keep our policies and procedures as airtight as possible," said Plante, a 30-year veteran of work in clerical sexual abuse and a member of the National Review Board from 2008 to 2012.

An obvious hole, he underscored, is: "What do we do about bishop accountability when they screw up? So far, it has been a Vatican problem to fix and that doesn't seem to work so well."

That issue and the Vatican role in the U.S. clerical sex abuse crisis took center stage Nov. 12 when U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' president, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, made the surprise announcement at the bishops' meeting in Baltimore that the Vatican had asked the conference to delay any vote on proposals to address clergy sexual abuse.

Plante told NCR he was "in total agreement" with comments at the meeting by Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich that the bishops continue their discussions and take nonbinding votes on the two proposals — one a new code of conduct for bishops, and the other establishment of a "special commission" to review complaints against bishops.

"We need to tell our people where we stand," Cupich said.

Cupich also proposed that the bishops hold a special session in March to confront the abuse issue, rather than wait until their scheduled June meeting.

Such a session would come immediately on the tails of a February summit in Rome of presidents of the world's episcopal conferences on the clerical sex abuse question.


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Ann Hurleypalmer joins other protesters Nov. 12 outside the hotel in Baltimore where the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was meeting during its fall general assembly. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

Plante also backed Bishop Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Missouri, who told NCR at the meeting that the Vatican seemed out of touch with the seriousness of the U.S. situation.

Many bishops are doing their best, McKnight said, but he speculated that "a cultural issue [might be] at play between the Holy See and the church in the United States." He questioned the U.S. bishops' "lethargic way of maneuvering and getting things done."

In a Nov. 12 email to NCR, Plante said, "While I could give the benefit of the doubt that the optics on this in America isn't so great, Catholics in America and others want progress and resolutions now. Waiting might be interpreted in multiple negative ways. I think people really need to hear that the American Church is on this problem and is plugging holes in the system, doing everything possible to get it right now. I'm anxious to hear the Vatican's thinking on this."

"I would worry that if they can't make solid progress on this very soon there won't be much of a church in the USA for them to lead not to mention completely losing their trust and moral authority among the faithful and the public," added Plante, who is also an adjunct clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine.

That said, he lauded the track record of the Dallas Charter and the work of the bishops' conference since 2002 as "excellent and very productive once implemented."

"These strategies are indeed working, with good data to prove it," he said. "The number of abuse cases since 1982-83 have dropped like a rock, and since 2002 they are really down to a trickle. There is less child abuse in the Catholic Church today than just about any other comparable organization."

Not infrequently, he pointed out, new cases involve international priests in the United States "for a short time on vacation, sabbatical and studies" who have "thus far, little or no accountability" to church officials here and who have not had the

screening and training now being required of U.S. clerics.

Focus on best practices, not handwringing

Plante would like to see the February Rome summit focus on "what best practices can be put into place" to combat abuse and on "improving bishop accountability" rather than handwringing and rehashing established research.

"This focus would be a much better use of their time and effort with a much bigger payoff than looking at root causes" of why priests have abused, according to Plante.

The "etiology" of the clerical sex abuse, he stressed, has been studied and documented, notably in the John Jay College of Criminal Justice's five-year study, "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010," released in 2011.

"Besides," he said, "you don't want to be re-arranging the furniture on the Titanic while the ship is sinking."

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Plante's remarks came partly in response to comments in an Oct. 25 NCR interview with Indian Cardinal Oswald Gracias in which the member of Pope Francis' nine-person Council of Cardinals suggested the February summit concentrate on "seeing why this happened" and "what is the cause?"

Plante, also director of the Applied Spirituality Institute, hopes bishops worldwide will consider "making evidence-based best practices in child protection universal."

"This wouldn't be hard to accomplish in my humble view," said Plante, a frequent contributor to Psychology Today and whose books include *Bless Me Father For I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests* and *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002-2012*.

He expressed some concern about "clericalism taking root" and "circling the wagons" at the February Vatican meeting, but was more worried "that they won't let experts in the field help them and that only men with Roman collars and red hats will make the decisions."

"Let's face it," he said, "sometimes you need other professionals like psychologists, law enforcement professionals, communications professionals, child protection professionals to help get this right. There are many engaged and devoted Catholics and non-Catholics willing to help. Will the bishops let them?"

A lack of historical perspective

The current crescendo of public outcry has come in the wake of a "perfect storm" of reports and revelations, Plante told NCR, including the Pennsylvania grand jury report in August, disclosures about ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Chilean bishops' resignations, "60 Minutes" and other reports on the Diocese of Buffalo, New York, and stories of abuse in Guam, Australia, Germany and other nations.

On Nov. 3, The Boston Globe and Philadelphia Inquirer co-published a 6,000-word wrap-up of church sex abuse with an emphasis on bishops failing to police themselves.

Panel discussions on how the church should address the issues have popped up across the country, including at university campuses such as Georgetown, Fordham and Santa Clara, where Plante spoke on the panel.



Thomas Plante, second from left, speaks during an Oct. 9 panel discussion titled "The Catholic Church and the Catastrophe of Clergy Sexual Abuse," at Santa Clara University in California. Other panelists were Fr. Brendan McGuire (left), who spoke of being abused as an 18-year-old; Santa Clara theologian Sally Vance-Trembath (second from right); and Jesuit Fr. Kevin O'Brien (right), dean of the Jesuit School of Theology. (NCR photo/Dan Morris-Young)

However, emphasized Plante, few reports make clear that most of the reported abuse took place before 2002.

"People tend to think that the Pennsylvania grand jury report is a snapshot of today while it is actually a snapshot of the past 70 years," he said, pointing out that "only two cases in the report occurred during the past decade, and they were well-known and dealt with."

The same lack of historical perspective, Plante added, is reflected in the recent Globe-Inquirer story in which he is quoted.

He described the joint reporting venture as "a bit of much ado about nothing."

"These are generally very old stories packaged together with only a few new revelations," he explained. "I couldn't help but wonder if the Globe was trying to relive their 2002 glory days."

He said the church has exchanged information and worked with various organizations that have children as their core constituency.

For example, he described "terrific progress" generated at a 2012 conference with leading researchers "hosted by the Boy Scouts with participation by the FBI, the U.S. Olympic Committee, the Catholic Church, Boys and Girls Club."

A major weakness in official church efforts on sexual misconduct rests on a poor communications strategy, Plante charged.

"Can they please do a better job at press communications? People are so misinformed and despondent and yet some pretty simple communications strategies could be so helpful. I feel for those who struggle with misinformation. Many rank-and-file Catholics and priests are so depressed about all of this and yet have not

been able to get good information about the problem."

Preconceived notions and axes to grind

Accurate information is made all the more elusive, he said, when media outlets have preconceived notions they want to push.

Misinformation and confusion are also generated when some Catholics have an axe to grind, such as a conviction that homosexual orientation and pedophilia are linked, or that celibacy distorts sexual health leading to inappropriate sexual activity.

Extensive research "inside and outside the church," he said, does not support either conclusion.

"Where people get confused is when they think correlation means causation," he said.

For example, he explained, because nearly eight in 10 victims of sexual abuse by priests are male, many want to tie the abuse to homosexuality.

"However, we know that sexual orientation in and of itself does not predict sexual crimes," he said.

These are "offenses of opportunity," he said, that historically have been associated with altar service, youth programs and/or athletics. As altar girls became more common, so did clerical abuse of them.



People attend a rally Nov. 13 sponsored by Church Militant in Baltimore. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

The John Jay investigations and Plante's own experience point to abusers as "situational generalists" who use trust and access to find victims, he said.

The situation is muddied, he admitted, in situations such as that of McCarrick, who has been credibly accused of sexual predation toward seminarians.

However, transgressions like McCarrick's are primarily exploitation of authority in same-sex situations with adult-aged persons, not pedophilia, Plante said.

Little realized, he added, is that serial abusers account for a significant percentage of overall victimization.

In the John Jay reports, he said, 129 men committed nearly a third of the 11,000 cases listed.

For example, infamous serial child molester John Geoghan, a former Boston priest, had at least 138 accusations, he said. "Most abusers had one known victim."

'State-of-the-art' testing

Contributing to the decline in church clerical abuse cases, he said, are beefed-up screening and formation protocols for seminarians and church workers.

Priestly formation programs in particular employ "state-of-the-art" testing, said Plante, who has taken part in almost 1,000 reviews and screenings of men seeking ordination.

"There are a variety of tests," he said, that provide data on an individual's impulse control, repressed anger, eating disorders, alcohol abuse, gambling issues and ability to maintain close relationships.

"Typically, sex offenders do not have a good record of long-term relationships with friends," according to Plante.

Among many things, seminarians are also vetted for head trauma and seizure disorders, which can sometimes be linked to behavioral problems, he said.

Seminary formation programs are also emphasizing psychosexual formation and human development to prepare potential priests to live healthy celibate lives and relate well with parishioners.

"At the end of the day, these tests are not perfect predictions" of seminarians' vocational success, but do establish "a good, appropriate assessment," Plante said.

The more muscular screening might also have helped deter potential serial abusers, another factor in the clerical abuse story largely ignored, according to Plante.

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR's West Coast correspondent. His email address is dmyoung@ncronline.org.]

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2018** feature series. View the full series.
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