News
Guest Voices



(Unsplash/Bill Oxford)



by David Clohessy

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Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of a then-secret crime: Fr. Gilbert Gauthe molested a boy in Louisiana in 1972.

Over a decade later, that crime — and dozens of others Gauthe committed — became national news. (Thanks, in part, to NCR). Thus began an unprecedented and at times overwhelming deluge of abuse and cover up reports which eventually led to over 7,000 U.S. priests being publicly accused of sexually violating children.

If you're a Catholic, chances are you're tired of this seemingly endless stream of allegations of clerical corruption (though the flow of abuse reports has slowed in recent years). And at least a few times over the past two decades, you have likely worried, "I wonder if kids in my parish are safe?"

I hope you've also asked yourself, several times, "What might I do to help prevent abuse in the church?"

Well, if you're able to remain open-minded, and not recoil in horror or laugh at a very counterintuitive proposal, keep reading. I have a suggestion that might address all three of these legitimate concerns.

Let's start with a scenario virtually all of us have experienced. It's time to take the bandage off. A nurse or doctor says, "I can take this off slowly or quickly, and to be honest, it will hurt either way. It's your choice."

My guess is that most of us would go with the speedy option. Best to just get it done and move on, right?

That speedy approach has never been a possibility with the clergy abuse crisis. Most victims could do little but privately report their predators to a bishop or a religious order superior. Wounds continue to fester in secrecy.

Some victims eventually found a way to take public action, through media interviews or some type of legal action. But this happened slowly, as adults who were hurt as kids ever-so-slowly became able to step forward.

However, since the Cardinal Theodore McCarrick revelations of 2018, the legal scene has quietly but dramatically changed. More and more lawmakers began realizing that victims of sex crimes just cannot promptly report these crimes, but need decades of recovery before being able to talk with police, prosecutors, advocates or

attorneys. Hundreds of these legislators began to accommodate victims' needs by relaxing or repealing archaic, arbitrary and predator-friendly statutes of limitations.

And they began enacting once-controversial civil 'window' laws, which enable anyone who was abused by anyone in any institution to sue, usually for a year or two only, the wrongdoers who committed and concealed child sex crimes. At this point, nearly half of the states have passed such measures.

In other words, in just a few years, the courthouse doors that for decades were largely closed to abuse victims, have been temporarily widely flung open. And that means that potentially thousands of still "under the radar" predators — including many priests, sisters, brothers, monks, bishops and other church staff — will be sued for their crimes, launching another devastating deluge of public disclosures.

(In New York alone, where a 'window' closes this Aug. 13, more than 7,000 such lawsuits have been filed and are still pending. More than half are against Catholic clerics and their church supervisors. Later this year, "windows" close in New Jersey and California, two other heavily Catholic states.)

In fairness, there are some arguments in favor of statutes of limitations generally. Defense lawyers and others note that over time, memories fade, witnesses die and evidence is lost, making it tougher for judges and juries to confidently make judgments about the veracity of cases.

So firm deadlines on litigation do, indeed, prod victims of some crimes to step forward more quickly. Child sex abuse victims, however, face powerful psychological barriers that make recognizing and disclosing the crimes and damage exceptionally tough. In reality, this means that many of these victims have only been able to report decades later, and will likely continue to do so.

So, here's my proposal: Catholics should vigorously spread the word about these new legal opportunities for victims. Yes, I'm arguing that parishioners should take steps that make clergy sex abuse lawsuits more likely.



Pictured are worshippers holding candles in this 2012 photo. (CNS file photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

On its face, this proposal may well seem laughable or even offensive. But isn't it better to expose as many wrongdoers, help as many victims and get as much truth revealed as possible? And isn't it best that this happen sooner than later?

This may sound grim. But remember: the alternative may be even more grim.

If no dramatic changes happen, every few weeks or months, for the rest of your life, you'll turn on the news or open the paper and see a story about another cleric being accused of, suspended for, charged with or defrocked because of abuse, whether admitted, alleged or proven. You'll hear yet another late-night comedian poke fun at the church you love.

And your doubts about your own parish, priest or bishop will resurface, even if just for a moment.

You may also feel, once again, the now-familiar resentment (in my view, appropriately) toward the church hierarchy, for not being proactive and compassionate, either years ago, when the alleged crimes happened or more recently, when it promised to start being transparent yet is still largely secretive.

You may also feel some anger (in my view, inappropriately) towards the "messenger" — the accuser, her attorney and the news outlet that carried the story.

And the excruciatingly slow peel of band aid after band aid will continue.

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The choice is clear: we can stick with the status quo. That essentially guarantees that most victims will never get the validation and acknowledgement and healing they deserve, nor the chance to publicly expose predators or enablers. That guarantees more abuse and cover-up. And it guarantees more coverage of sometimes sickening abuse exposes, lawsuits, settlements and the rest.

Or again, we can try something different: actively encouraging victims to use the time-tested though admittedly flawed justice system to shine the light of truth on this long-hidden horror.

So, let's try the new approach. Let's stop passively sitting back, waiting with low-level dread for the next and the next and the next shoes to drop, while wounded victims continue to struggle in silence, isolation, shame and self-blame, and predators continue to perpetrate in secrecy.

Let's aggressively try to find those victims and gently prod them toward action — both for their sakes and the sake of the church itself.