

David learns to use his sling

Nicole Sotelo | Sep. 3, 2009

A simple sling, used skillfully in biblical times, was known to take down a giant. Two weeks ago, a 39-year old modern-day David used a microphone at a news conference, instead of a sling, and helped to bring down a colossal silence about sexual abuse that had stood over him for 25 years.

Because of Mark McAllister's courage to speak out, the story of Fr. Carmine Sita, aka Fr. Gerald Howard, was heard by thousands. Sita was convicted of abuse in New Jersey, legally changed his name, and was quietly sent to an unsuspecting Missouri parish where he molested again. Within two weeks of McAllister's disclosure, the telephone began ringing at SNAP, the Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests. One by one, voices on the phone -- each one courageous, all tragically linked in a web of victimization -- declared that they, too, had been abused by the same priest.

By the end of last week, seven more survivors had joined Mark in breaking the silence. It appears that the abusive priest has lived freely for more than two decades, potentially putting other children at risk. Now that the silence has been broken, there is pressure on the diocese and the courts to ensure the priest will not harm others. Speaking truth saves lives.

As a child, my parish suffered two pedophile priests within a twelve-year period. Mothers spoke in hushed tones in the church parking lot after school. Priests in the pulpit spoke about God's love but remained silent about rapes by clergy.

Silence and whispers have been the rule in Catholic culture when it comes to sexual abuse, but this culture allows criminals to walk freely and forces survivors to remain in fear. I confess I have been culpable of the sin of silence.

It's not easy to talk about or take action to heal the wounds of sexual abuse. It is not something easily broached over donuts after church. Proclaiming the truth from the housetops, as the biblical exhortation goes, has come slowly to Catholics. But that is changing.

Survivors and laity are learning to speak up and doing so beyond just housetops.

In the diocese of Baker, Ore., a group of laity recently succeeded in getting an op-ed placed in their local paper. The editorial rang the alarm that the bishop continues to refuse to implement an abuse-prevention program, promised seven years ago in the bishops' own Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

Concerned Catholics in the Lincoln, Neb., diocese have used news conferences and newspapers to warn parents to protect their children because the bishop has ignored the U.S. bishops' own mandate for diocesan-wide background checks and abuse-prevention programs.

Catholics and non-Catholics alike are coming together from across New York state to push legislation that would allow sexual predators, and those who shield predators, to be brought to justice

(www.nychildvictimsact.org).

Catholics across the country are slowly learning that the Goliath culture of silence in Catholicism that threatens the lives of children and our entire faith community must be brought down. We are learning how to shatter the culture of silence; learning to proclaim in the light what we have known for decades in the dark.

I can only hope that we can all be as brave as the survivor Mark McAllister in speaking the truth -- about our own abuse or helping to stop the abuse of others. What we have heard in whispers, what we fear to say, must be proclaimed from the housetops ? and in news conferences, blogs, vigils and courtrooms.

The heroes of our time are the Mark McAllisters among us and those who stand in solidarity with him and other survivors. The modern David is the one who slays the culture of silence that threatens our children using the sling of modernity: our voice.

If you know of abuse taking place or are a survivor, contact SNAP at 1.877.762.7432 or SNAPDORRIS@gmail.com.

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