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Church and school: How two institutions respond to sexual misconduct

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

You have to be living in a hole these days not to hear about the Roman Catholic church's sex abuse crisis, either in the United States or in Europe. It's being reported on and blogged about immensely in *National Catholic Reporter* and *The New York Times*. There was even a column about the sexual abuse crisis at the school for the deaf in Milwaukee that appeared in the secular monthly publication *Madison Magazine*.

The Catholic church is not the only institution dealing with and responding to issues of sexual misconduct. Recently, the school district where I used to be a student had several employees named in an e-mail investigation where employees were distributing pornographic words and images using their work e-mail accounts on their school computers.

Back in December 2009, Wisconsin's Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District conducted a search of the district e-mail system, and the results of the study were overseen by the director of employee services for the district. The district released a report last week on the findings, and named and disciplined the teachers with suspensions for eight full-time teachers and termination of a substitute teacher.

It irks me because it reminds me of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church. Here we have teachers, role model, who violated their code of conduct, which was put in place to protect students.

There is a difference, though, in how the two institutions have dealt with the crisis.

The school district released details: the names of the teachers in violation of the code of conduct, the extent of their poor decision-making, and the penalties levied against them. The report even contains the graphic content that was sent. It seems as transparent a process as possible.

My point is that what the Catholic Church is facing is not necessarily new. This is not to say that it isn't a crisis that so many priests have either been convicted or accused of malicious sexual acts. The truth is that things like this are happening in all sorts of professions: business, education and health. The difference seems to be how it is dealt with. There is a certain mystique that seems to come along with being ordained as a priest or being the pope. As Kate Childs Graham pointed out in her column last week, the laity have the right *and* the responsibility to take action during this crisis. What isn't always so clear is what avenues the laity have to take and what process to follow in order to deal with the sins of the clergy.

It seems that the church could take a page out of the books of so many other institutions that have dealt swiftly and transparently with sexual misconduct. A poll on the *Middleton Times-Tribune's* Web site (green box, lower left of page) indicates (as of Sunday, April 25) that nearly half of the readers think the school district's sanctions against the perpetrators are just right. With all the recent media coverage, it doesn't seem that the church would face the same approval ratings in the court of public opinion on how the institution has dealt with the sexual abuse crisis.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his master of divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkley, Calif. He lives with his wife in his hometown in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog www.youngadultholics-blog.com.]

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