The Conroy case: SNAP's unfortunate demand for perfection

by Tom Roberts
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The nomination of Fr. Patrick J. Conroy, a Jesuit who happens to hail from the order’s Oregon Province, as chaplain for the House of Representatives, is running into some obstacles because of objections from SNAP and other victims’ advocates.

I am long on record supporting and lauding the work of SNAP and its various leaders. I think the church would be far worse off today than it is were it not for the persistence of such leading figures as David Clohessy, Barbara Blaine and Peter Isely in keeping the spotlight on the institution’s handling of abuse, its failure to face the truth of what has been done in the name of protecting the institution, and in generally raising awareness of the destruction that is wrought when adults in positions of authority exploit the most vulnerable in the community.

It is because of my regard and public endorsement of the work of SNAP over the years that I feel compelled to publicly criticize the objection to Conroy’s nomination.

The objection seems to rest on a fact of geography—Conroy is a member of a province that has recently paid out $166 million for more than 400 claims of child sexual abuse. It also rests on the charge that he was less than perfect, by today’s standards, in notifying authorities about an abusive priest back in the mid-1980s.

No one is charging that Conroy ever did anything wrong. He is not accused of abuse. He is not among those involved in any of the cases that were settled. In fact, in 1986, years before the U.S. bishops established norms and a charter for the protection of youth, Conroy wrote a letter to then-Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle, reporting that a boy told him he had been abused by a priest when he
was 12 or 13 years old.

The accuser was about 20 years old when he spoke to Conroy. The priest told the Seattle Times in 2002 that he didn’t get a response from the archdiocese. Isely now charges that he should have followed up with the archdiocese and gone to the police. Perhaps he should have. In a perfect world perhaps he would have.

But the fact of the matter is that Conroy, though not perfect in reporting what he knew, went much further than most priests at the time and placed himself on record with a letter detailing what he knew.

The concern I have is that SNAP, in haunting a career on such thin rationale, risks marginalizing itself in an arena that can be easily hostile to its most valuable work. Demanding the kind of perfection that would be required in this instance to satisfy SNAP, or disqualifying Conroy simply because, as some victims have demanded, he comes from a province where a lot of ugly abuse occurred, is painting with such a broad brush that the claims verge on frivolous.

It would be good to remember that some of those now correctly hailed as courageous in unveiling the institution’s duplicity, and who now call for victims to go to law enforcement instead of church authorities, did not themselves, in the early years of the scandal (the mid-1980s) turn over perpetrators to police.

There has to be some allowance for the fact that our understanding of the problem has evolved over the past decades; some consideration should be made for a courageous act at a time when most priests, we now know, looked the other way when they became aware of abuse.

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