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Unfinished work: Examining 10 years of clergy sex abuse

by Joshua J. McElwee



Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese (© Rick Reinhard 2012)

SANTA CLARA, Calif. -- Ten years after widespread news coverage of sexual abuse by priests rocked the U.S. Catholic church, hierarchical response to the continuing crisis indicates the church has "lost its ability to be a self-correcting institution," Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese told a symposium of experts on clergy abuse Friday.

Reese delivered the keynote speech this morning at a daylong conference titled "Clergy Sexual Abuse Ten Years Later," being held at Jesuit-run Santa Clara University. Following Reese is a series of panel discussions from a wide-range of sex abuse experts.

Among the speakers are some who firmly defend the U.S. bishops' response to the crisis, particularly since the implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in 2002 and others who sometimes vehemently point to its weaknesses.

The presenters include Kathleen McChesney, the first director of the U.S. bishops office of child and youth protection; Ohio Judge Michael Merz, a former member and chair of the bishops' National Review

Board; Dominican Fr. Tom Doyle, a canon lawyer known for authoring one of the first reports on the subject; and Barbara Blaine, founder and president of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

In his keynote, Reese addressed "the unfinished work of responding to the sexual abuse crisis." He said that despite changes in church policy to better investigate abuse, "the problem in the Catholic church today is that the hierarchy has so focused on obedience and control" that it can no longer fix itself.

"Creative theologians are attacked, sisters are investigated, Catholic publications are censored and loyalty is the most important virtue. These actions are defended by the hierarchy because of fears of "scandalizing the faithful," when in fact it is the hierarchy who have scandalized the faithful," said Reese, a senior fellow at Georgetown's Woodstock Theological Center.

"We still do not have a system for bringing bishops to account," Reese said. "It is a disgrace that only one bishop (Cardinal [Bernard] Law of Boston) resigned because of his failure to deal with the sexual abuse crisis. The church would be in a much better place today if 30 or more bishops had stood up, acknowledged their mistakes, taken full responsibility, apologized and resigned."

"A shepherd is supposed to lay down his life for his sheep; these men were unwilling to lay down their croziers for the good of the church," he continued.

"The Vatican also needs to do its job. It appears to have no problem investigating nuns and theologians, but investigating mismanagement by a bishop is not a priority," he said.

"Even when a bishop is indicted, no one has the sense to tell him to take a leave of absence until the case is over," he continued, in an apparent reference to Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn, the first sitting bishop to face a criminal trial for failing to report a priest suspected of sexual misconduct.

Reese also said that the church "needs to re-envision its attitude" toward abuse survivors, saying the U.S. church cannot see victims "simply as clients or problems to be dealt with." Rather we have to see them as integral to our community, persons who must be welcomed.

"Such an attitude would encourage the church to reach out to the thousands of victims of sexual abuse who have not come forward. We want them to come forward; the church needs them."

Among the range of criticisms made by Reese in his talk to the gathering:

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- The fact that the investigative process outlined in the 2002 *Charter* "appears suspect because it is under the control of the bishop."

"Episcopal credibility here is nil," said Reese. "The process will only have credibility to the extent that it is seen as truly independent of the bishop. Only an independent process will have the credibility to say that, "Yes, this priest can return to ministry."?"

- A lack of willingness on behalf of bishops to point out when their peers haven't followed reporting guidelines.

“The bishops have to step up and supervise their own,” said Reese. “They must speak out and publicly criticize those bishops that are not observing the charter or are failing in their responsibilities. Bishops, including the president of the bishops conference, need to say, “Shame on you bishop, get your house in order.” This is not a canonical judgment; this is fraternal correction.”

- The fact that there is “no standard operation procedure” for investigation of allegations of abuse. “Each diocese is on its own, with the result that some do better than others,” said Reese.
- The lack of developed “best practices” for dioceses to assist them as they discern how to investigate abuse.

“We don’t even know how many priests are suspended or how long their suspensions last,” said Reese. “Many priests fear that if they are falsely accused they will be suspended indefinitely because the bishop is afraid to return them to ministry.”

Reese also criticized what he called a “culture of fear and dependency” in the church.

Pointing to the fact that diocesan priests are “totally dependent on the good will of their bishop” in getting desired assignments and promotions, he said simply that “speaking truth to power is not welcomed in the Catholic Church.”

“In this corporate culture, few are going to tell the bishop “no,”” he continued, referring to the ongoing trial in Philadelphia of Msgr. William Lynn, a former secretary of clergy in that archdiocese who is the first diocesan administrator to be criminally charged for shuffling around priests suspected of abuse rather than reporting them to police.

“The one pastor in Philadelphia, who refused to accept an abusive priest, got reprimanded and punished for challenging the archbishop,” said Reese. “This is what happens when you speak truth to power in the Catholic Church.”

Ending his talk with an attempt to find hope for the future, Reese said “hopefully someday what we learn about the detection, prevention and healing of abuse in the church may be of help in responding to abuse in American society.”

The conference at Santa Clara University follows publication of many of the speakers’ viewpoints on the scandal in a new book, titled *Sexual Abuses in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002-2012*.

Published in October 2011, the book also includes chapters written by retired Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, psychotherapist and former priest A.W. Richard Sipe, and Karen Terry, interim dean of research at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. He and *NCR* West Coast correspondent Monica Clark will be filing reports from the conference at Santa Clara University.]

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