

Note to Fr. Groeschel: It wasn't the kids' fault

Tom Roberts | Aug. 29, 2012 NCR Today

Fr. Benedict Groeschel has led an inspiring life, particularly in his role as head of a band of brothers known as the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal. I've written admiringly of the Bronx-based friars in the past. For whatever one might think of their rather conservative approach to religious matters (Fr. Groeschel is a regular on EWTN), the friars live out of the heart of the gospel's admonition to be with the poor, a position that has no liberal or conservative slant.

In short, they put their lives on the line.

In a recent interview with John Burger for the *National Catholic Register*, Groeschel looks back on his 25 years with the friars, a growing national and international community that started as a part of the better-known Capuchin Franciscans. His reflections are worth reading and his recollections at the end of the piece, a poetic reflection on death that leads to a recounting of a powerful moment as a youth, are particularly edifying.

But there is a section of the interview, in which he discusses the sex abuse crisis, that simply cannot stand unchallenged. It is particularly disturbing because he's earned significant credentials in psychology. Asked whether he's worked with priests who have been abusive he said:

"A little bit, yes; but you know, in those cases they have to leave. And some of them profoundly, profoundly penitential, horrified. People have this picture in their minds of a person planning to be a psychopath. But that's not the case. Suppose you have a man having a nervous breakdown, and a youngster comes after him (emphasis in original). A lot of the cases, the youngster is the seducer."

Let's throw out the 18-year-olds and the whole question of power relationships and such. The majority of cases occurred with youngsters well below that age and in situations where the kids, not the priests, were the vulnerable and needy ones.

Fr. Groeschel might want to spend some time there are week's worth, if not more, of material to peruse on the bishopaccountability.com Web site. There he'll find transcripts, letters from bishops, depositions, court transcriptions and grand jury reports that should go rather far in convincing him that the primary problem with the sex abuse scandal among Catholic clergy was not seductive eight, nine and 10-year-olds. Not even 14-18-year olds.

The paper in which the interview appeared — the *National Catholic Register* — was once owned by the Legion of Christ. Don't go looking into their files for any truth on the life of the late Marciel Maciel Degollado, founder of the order, at least while the publication was under control of the Legion. It has since been sold — part of the selloff of the order's assets — to EWTN. It is heartening to see that the current readers also find Groeschel's comments about abuse deeply disturbing.

Certainly Fr. Groeschel knows that Maciel, who lived a variety of lives and was ultimately sanctioned by the Vatican, not only molested his own young seminarians, but had children by at least two women.

The testimony of Maciel's victims is abundant. His behavior was monstrous, and not because little boys were seducing him. He exemplifies that side of the clerical culture that is both calculating and deceptive ? he had many fooled, including a pope ? and that is far more the heart of the problem than seductive kids.

A depressing sameness emerges from the pattern of the scandal and the coverup that was deliberately carried out over decades and, as we continue to learn, across cultures. At its worst moments here, it involved far more than two percent of the ordained in this country.

The scandal is perpetuated because the church, particularly in the person of its bishops, has gone to great lengths to conceal the truth over decades. Attempting now to alter the truth of the matter and to place the blame on the victims will only re-open old wounds and paint the church anew as an institution incapable of dealing with its own sin.

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