

What the media missed in the sexual-abuse scandal

—Twenty-third in a series; first of three parts.—

By Patrick J. Schiltz

I am often invited to present the “other side” of the clergy sexual-abuse “story.” I receive these invitations because, as first a practicing attorney and then a law professor, I have advised every major Christian denomination in connection with more than 500 clergy sexual-abuse cases in almost all 50 states. My clients have included Catholic dioceses, orders, bishops and priests, and thus people assume that, if there is another side of this story to be told, I will be able to tell it.

There is, in fact, much about this story that has been ignored or distorted by the media. Before I elaborate, though, I must be clear about the following: Hundreds of pastors — Catholic and non-Catholic — did indeed sexually abuse thousands of children and vulnerable adults. Many bishops and other church leaders did indeed learn of abusive pastors, cover up abuse, and do little to protect children and vulnerable adults. The acts of these pastors and bishops did indeed cause incalculable harm.

All of this is true, and not one word of this article is meant to excuse any of it. I have spent hundreds of hours talking with victims of clergy sexual abuse — some who were suing my clients, some who were helping my clients to rid themselves of abusive pastors, and some who just wanted to help me to advise my clients better. Listening to victims describe their pain can be unbearable. I cannot imagine how much worse it must be to experience that pain. I take a back seat to no one in my loathing of clergy sexual abuse.

That said, it also frustrates me that the media have distorted many aspects of the abuse crisis and left the public terribly misinformed. My purpose in this article is to examine the conduct of the media as carefully as the media have examined the conduct of bishops and priests. The most remarkable thing about the news coverage of the recent past is that almost nothing covered has been new.

By this, I do not mean that we did not learn the names of more abusive priests or the names of more victims or the details of more horrible decisions made by bishops. Rather, I mean that every major element of the overall story — every single one — had already been reported years ago. For over a decade, we have known that several hundred priests committed abuse, that thousands of children were abused, and that some bishops learned of abuse and failed to stop it.

Remember Gilbert Gauthé? Or James Porter? These cases and many like them were the subject of unrelenting front page coverage in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I was interviewed hundreds of times back then, and I have been interviewed hundreds of times in the last couple of years. The questions that I have been asked recently are pretty much the same as the questions that I was asked more than ten years ago. There is nothing new here.

I have challenged reporters to cite a single major element of the clergy sexual-abuse story that was not widely reported a decade ago. No reporter has been able to do so. I have also challenged reporters to cite another instance in the history of American journalism in which the press gave front-page coverage — not for a day or two, but for months on end — to a story that had been thoroughly covered a decade earlier. Again,

no reporter has been able to do so.

Plaintiffs’ attorneys like to complain that the Catholic Church receives special treatment. In the case of the recent media coverage, the church’s treatment has indeed been special.

The second most remarkable thing about the news coverage of the recent past is that, despite devoting hundreds of thousands of words to clergy sexual misconduct, the media have ignored the most important story of all: Clergy sexual abuse has virtually disappeared. Over the past decade, clergy sexual abuse has been almost completely eradicated from the Roman Catholic Church and from most other major denominations.

If you have a few hours to kill sometime, I encourage you to go online or go down to the public library and read every article about clergy sexual misconduct published in the last two years by a major newspaper — say, the New York Times or the Boston Globe. Jot down every instance of clergy sexual abuse that was reported. And then, when you are finished, look over your notes and count how many of the reported instances of abuse occurred in the last decade. The answer, you will find, is almost none.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, churches got sued a lot. In response, they adopted tough new sexual-misconduct policies. They removed hundreds of abusive pastors from active ministry. They vastly improved seminary screening and training. They produced educational materials for parishes. They reached out to victims. They established hotlines. They trained victim advocates. They held countless training sessions for religious and lay leaders. By and large they also treated victims with care and compassion.

Over all, churches invested hundreds of millions of dollars and hundreds of millions of person hours in combating clergy sexual misconduct. This was the ecclesiastical equivalent of mounting the D-Day invasion. And churches had stunning success. By the end of the decade, clergy sexual abuse had almost disappeared from the major American denominations.

Just to give you some sense of this: Two of the epicenters of clergy sexual abuse in the United States have been the Archdiocese of Boston and the Archdiocese of Louisville. Yet the attorney general of Massachusetts could find no recent abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston, notwithstanding an extraordinarily thorough investigation that received saturation publicity and that had the cooperation of hundreds of victims and plaintiffs’ attorneys. Similarly, last fall, the Louisville Courier analyzed the 185 lawsuits that had been filed against the Archdiocese of Louisville and found that precisely one — one! — involved abuse that had occurred since 1990.

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