



Opinion

Bishop Paprocki: The truth of past abuse, present reality

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The sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests is a disgrace. It demands, and the Diocese of Springfield pledges, continued efforts to bring healing to the victims of these grave sins. The report issued on Dec. 19 by the Illinois Attorney General's office is, however, highly misleading. Factual clarification is imperative.

Here are the facts specific to the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois:

1. The majority of abuse cases occurred over 30 years ago, and only one has occurred since 2002.
2. Of the approximately 650 diocesan priests who have served here since 1923, 41 (6.3 percent) have been accused of sexual abuse of a minor. Nineteen of those were deemed to be substantiated (2.9 percent of all diocesan priests), of whom all have been publicly identified (www.promise.dio.org); 12 are deceased; four are laicized; and three are removed from ministry.
3. Twenty-two allegations were not substantiated, and 15 of those priests are deceased. Priests, like anyone else, are innocent until proven guilty and have a right to their good name and reputation unless proven otherwise. Anyone with information regarding abuse of a minor by clergy is encouraged to contact the Diocese's Child Abuse Reporting and Investigation number at 217-321-1155 and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Child Abuse Hotline at 800-25-ABUSE.

One case of clerical sexual abuse is one too many. But the facts show this to have been a historic problem, not one recurring regularly in the present. This was not made clear by the Attorney General's report, which suggested that there is a continuing rape culture in the Catholic Church that is being covered up. That is false.

(OVER)

During my eight years as bishop of Springfield, there has been only one new allegation of abuse by a priest in active ministry. He was immediately withdrawn from ministry in 2013, then permanently removed from ministry following an investigation and consistent with the recommendation of our Review Board. Prior to my installation here, there was only one incident of sexual misconduct with minors in the past two decades, resulting in the priest's permanent removal from ministry.

Meanwhile, outside the Catholic Church, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services received 20,170 allegations of child sexual abuse in 2017 alone. The department found 15,185 (75.3 percent) of these allegations to be "unfounded," meaning "An investigation of suspected child abuse/neglect has revealed no credible evidence that the abuse/neglect occurred." Moreover, The State Journal-Register reported on Nov. 19 that a Chicago Public Schools hotline received 133 reports of alleged misconduct by adults in less than three months, and a review of background checks on tens of thousands of public-school district workers, vendors, and volunteers "resulted in 126 employees being fired, recommended for dismissal or resigning under scrutiny."

These facts do not diminish the gravity of clergy sexual abuse. They do, however, tell us that child sexual abuse is a societal plague. Addressing it, as we all must, requires avoiding inaccurate and misleading caricatures that try to focus attention solely on the Catholic Church, as conveyed by the Attorney General's report. The Diocese of Springfield has been, and will be, vigilant in protecting those in our care. Ending the plague of the sexual abuse of the young, however, requires fair and accurate reporting of all the facts. The Catholic Church stands ready to assist other institutions in adapting the reforms we have instituted so that they, too, may be safe environments for the young. As a country, and for the sake of our children, our universal effort should be to eradicate the horror of child sexual abuse from every part of our society.

The Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki is Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois.