

Keep shining spotlight on clergy abuse

This week another wave of clergy sex abuse crimes became public, this time from the state of Pennsylvania. Since 2002, again and again waves of horrific accounts of clergy abusing minors have made the news. Now, the wave includes further evidence that some church leaders covered up accusations and their clergy perpetrators.

Two years ago the Oscars named “Spotlight” the best movie of the year.

I didn’t want to see the movie. Right after it was first released, I made myself go to see “Spotlight.” It focuses on the *Boston Globe*’s investigation into the clerical sexual abuse scandal. In early 2002 it uncovered publicly the many cases of clergy sex abuse in the powerful stronghold of Catholicism, the Archdiocese of Boston. By the end of that year, Archbishop Bernard Law had resigned his leadership of that archdiocese. Moreover, cases of clergy sexual abuse of minors came to light all over the United States.

One of the lawyers for the Boston church made an insightful analysis of the unfolding crisis. He told one of the *Globe*’s reporters: “If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.”

That most of these incidents of abuse happened decades ago doesn’t lessen the pain and horror. There were those in parishes who had kept quiet as the scandal became slowly known—one painful instance after another. There were church officials who shuffled from one parish to another priests known as sexual predators. In fact, years earlier reporters at the *Boston Globe* learned about victims as their stories started coming forward. They didn’t give it the publicity that the atrocities warranted. Who wants to challenge a church which not only did so much good, but which also carried such clout in the community?

After the movie I sat in the lobby of the theatre, feeling as if someone had kicked me in the stomach. I felt seared by sadness and grief—first of all, for the victims whose trauma may never heal. I felt angry with a church which I love. And I came to the harsh realization that, if there had not been a free press to challenge power, the scandal would have stayed under the radar for much longer. I suspect it would not have been uncovered voluntarily.

Fifteen years later, what have we learned? The Catholic Church has been especially egregious in this crime and scandal. Nonetheless, other church communities, schools, and groups have had the “spotlight” shine on them regarding child sexual abuse.

Every institution needs to be called to accountability—especially for the care of children and other minors. Fortunately, in our nation, the Catholic Church and many other church communities and schools have strong safeguards now in place to make sure these crimes do not happen in the future. However, the “spotlight” still needs to be more than simply the media. We, too, must be the “spotlight,” demanding transparency of church leaders in the aftermath of “cover-up.” We must be the “spotlight,” calling for the end of statutes of limitations on the prosecution of such heinous crimes against minors.

Over these years I’ve had persons share with me the trauma of child sexual abuse by clergy—carried out decades ago. I’ve heard from family members about a loved one who suffered sexual abuse from a priest. Again and again—the pain still remains raw, the healing slow. I’ve also known priests falsely accused of child sexual abuse. And, I have visited a former priest (not from West Tennessee) in prison, sentenced for many years because of the crime of clergy sexual abuse of minors. We had worked together during our years in the seminary. I would never have imagined that he would do such a crime.

Almost three years ago, Pope Francis was invited to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress. In his speech he highlighted four Americans who illustrated the best ideals of our republic. One of the four—the only woman—was Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement. She died in 1980. In his address Pope Francis acclaimed that “her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints.”

In one of her writings Dorothy Day put it bluntly and honestly: “I loved the Church...Christ made visible. Not for itself, because it was so often a scandal to me...The Church is the Cross on which Christ was crucified; one could not separate Christ from His Cross, and one must live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction with the Church.”

Amen.

