ARCHDIOCESE of BALTIMORE

Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church

What did the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report say?

A Pennsylvania Grand Jury reviewed the files of six dioceses and found that 300 priests had been accused of committing child sexual abuse over the previous seven decades and that bishops often failed to report the abuse to police or to permanently remove from ministry the accused priest. The report revealed widespread abuse of children by priests and a pattern of cover-up by bishops who put institutional well-being over that of children.

Why is child sexual abuse still occurring in the Church?

According to an analysis, of the 300 priests described as abusers in the recently released Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, only two are accused of abusing within the past 10 years. All the other cases are decades old. About half of the 300 priests are dead. None are in ministry. There is reason to believe that the comprehensive reforms and uniform child protection procedures developed by the bishops in 2002, along with much greater societal awareness and commitment to preventing child abuse, are having a significant positive impact and have led to drastic reductions in new allegations of abuse in the Church.

How did the bishops respond to the crisis in 2002?

Following the 2002 revelation of widespread child sexual abuse in the Church, the US Bishops developed the Charter for the Protection of Children & Young People and the Essential Norms to ensure consistent and standard handling of abuse allegations by Church officials in the United States. The Charter and Norms require zero tolerance for all credible allegations and established policies around screening, background checks, safe environment training, selection and training of future priests as well as outreach to survivors of abuse.

How did the Archdiocese of Baltimore respond to the abuse crisis?

Major steps were taken with the development of written child protection policies and the establishment of the Archdiocese's Independent Child Abuse Review Board in 1993. In 2002, the Archdiocese created an Office of Child and Youth Protection to assist in implementing the requirements of the Charter. Also, in September 2002, the Archdiocese of Baltimore released the names of all priests against whom a credible allegation of abuse had been made, dating back to the 1940s. This disclosure, among the first of its kind, was part of a letter sent by the Archbishop of Baltimore to every registered household in the Archdiocese and also included the amount of money expended on settlements and counseling for survivors. The list of abusive clergy was posted on the archdiocesan website and in the media. The list continues to be updated and is maintained on the child protection page of the archdiocesan website.

What is the Church currently doing to keep children safe?

The Archdiocese of Baltimore vigorously enforces the Charter and Norms by requiring criminal history screenings for all clergy, religious and employees and for all volunteers who work with children. As well, the Archdiocese requires all clergy, employees and any volunteer who has substantial contact with children to undergo mandatory safe environment training. Children in our schools and religious education programs also receive age-appropriate education that can help prevent abuse. The Archdiocese immediately reports all allegations of abuse and has a zero-tolerance policy, permanently barring from ministry anyone credibly accused of abuse. The Church participates in an independent audit of its compliance with the Charter and also conducts its own audit of parish and school files to ensure compliance with all child protection policies and safeguards.

How does the Church respond to an allegation of abuse?

When the Archdiocese receives an allegation of abuse it immediately reports it to civil authorities, extends an offer of counseling to the survivor and removes the alleged abuser from ministry until credibility can be determined. Once given permission from civil authorities, the Archdiocese meets with the alleged victim and the accused and if the allegation is deemed credible, the perpetrator is permanently barred from ministry and placed on a "do not hire" list.

How does the Church help survivors of abuse?

Anyone making a credible allegation of abuse against a representative of the Church is offered an apology, an opportunity to meet with the archbishop and counseling assistance with a counselor of their choosing, for as long as it is helpful. Those survivors wishing to be in control of their own counseling arrangements are given the opportunity, along with their own attorney, to meet with a retired, non-Catholic judge who, after hearing from the survivor and representatives of the Church in a non-adversarial environment, will conduct a mediation leading to a monetary settlement for the survivor.

Does the Church limit counseling for survivors of abuse?

No. The Church pays for counseling as long as appropriate, often for years. However, in circumstances where survivors choose mediation and receive a settlement, survivors acknowledge that the Church will no longer pay counselors for their therapy and that the money awarded them is to compensate them for the harm suffered by them and to cover any future counseling expenses.

Does my offertory donation to my parish or to archdiocesan campaigns fund settlements or abuse-related legal fees?

Payment of monetary settlements, counseling assistance and associated legal fees comes from the archdiocesan insurance program and reserves, not from the general funds of the archdiocese or parishes.

Can survivors of abuse sue the Church for monetary claims?

Yes. Current law in the State of Maryland allows individuals to sue for monetary damages in cases of child sexual abuse until age 38. With the support of the Catholic Church in Maryland, the State passed a law in 2017 extending the age from 25 to 38, recognizing that childhood survivors of such crimes often wait many years before reporting their abuse.

Is there a statute of limitations on the criminal prosecution of abusers?

In the State of Maryland, anyone who has committed a felony, including child sexual abuse, can be prosecuted at any time. There is no statute of limitations for felonies in Maryland.

What is being done to ensure healthy and well-formed future priests?

Drastic changes have been made to the way the Church recruits future priests and in the training and formation of seminarians. Years ago, high schools served as minor seminaries for boys who would then enter seminaries as early as 9th grade. Today, the Archdiocese of Baltimore's program for priestly formation will not accept men until they have completed high school. In addition, the Archdiocese employs a rigorous screening process that utilizes a series of examinations, background checks and interviews prior to admitting men into its formation program. In addition, seminaries have made great advances in the training, forming and evaluating of men for suitability as priests.

Will the Church release its files for abusive priests?

In 2002, the Archdiocese of Baltimore became among the first dioceses in the world to examine its personnel files and release the names of all known priests who had been credibly accused of abuse. To date, only 40 of the nearly-200 dioceses in the U.S. have done so. Making public entire personnel files would violate state and federal privacy laws and releasing even redacted files would, some survivors worry, still pose a risk to their privacy. The Church has and will continue to cooperate with any law enforcement investigation by making available requested information in conjunction with any investigation of Church personnel.

How are lay people currently involved in the handling of abuse allegations?

The Archdiocese consults with an Independent Review Board comprised almost entirely of layand non-Catholic professionals (including retired judges, police chiefs, doctors, social workers, teachers, and others) who review the Church's handling of all allegations of abuse. The Board meets quarterly and is actively involved in overseeing the Church's compliance with the Charter and documents its work in an annual report. Further, archdiocesan leadership involved in decision-making and review of allegations of child sexual abuse consist largely of laity.

How can laity have a greater role?

Expanding the role of laity in the Church's oversight and enforcement of child protection policies is a priority of the Archdiocese and its leaders. Expanding the jurisdiction and authority of the Review Board and granting direct access to Board members to individuals wishing to make direct reports of allegations of abuse are among proposals currently being considered.

Why are bishops not held accountable like priests or others?

Currently the Pope has sole authority over the appointment, oversight and discipline of bishops. The Archdiocese and its leadership support calls for reform to bring about greater accountability of bishops, including the involvement of laity and the creation of procedures that give individuals greater confidence when reporting allegations against bishops. The Pope has demonstrated a willingness to hold wayward bishops accountable (Australia, Chile, e.g.). There are structures in place for bishops to be disciplined; when those structures fall into disuse bad things happen.