

Myths About Child Sexual Abuse - Part 2

In Part 1 of this series, we looked at the most popular or well-known “myths” about child sexual abuse and the people who commit this crime. We discovered that these common myths were not supported by “facts.” In Part 2, we will look at other types of “myths.” This second set of myths is not so easy to dismiss because they contain an element of truth.

When a statement has a factual foundation, the *myth* is more difficult to identify. The *truth* in the statement is often distorted or oversimplified but, because there is some truth to it, the statement is frequently interpreted as “fact” rather than “myth.”

Many of these statements appear in articles addressing the issue of child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy and the Church’s response to such abuse. If our objective is to understand what really happened and to create an environment where it can never happen again, it is important for thoughtful people of faith to separate the “truth” from the “myth” in these statements.

- **MYTH:** All child molesters are dangerous pedophiles. They abuse lots of children and are incurable.

FACT: The truth is that “pedophiles” are an ongoing threat to society. Pedophiles are high-profile, often notorious abusers with hundreds of victims. They are usually resistant to psychological treatment and are an ongoing threat to society. It is important that pedophiles be prevented from having any future contact with children.

However, not all child molesters are “pedophiles.” In fact, real pedophiles appear to be the exception among people who abuse children. Most offenders have a very different clinical profile. They are not compulsive, habitual pedophiles. While these other offenders should be subject to the law and must pay for their crimes, many can be rehabilitated through appropriate treatment. They can go on to lead productive lives and their recidivism rate is very low. *This does not mean, however, that someone who abuses children, even once, should ever be allowed to work with children unsupervised again.*

It simply means that we must be aware of the complexities of the problem. And, we must remember that to prevent abuse, adults in the faith community must work together to create an environment where there is no opportunity for abuse to occur. In so doing, we will eliminate the risk from both the pedophile (or “preferential” offender) and these other, more prevalent situational offenders.

- **MYTH:** The priesthood’s celibate lifestyle attracts men with sexual problems; therefore, celibacy makes a priest more vulnerable to sexual activity with a child.

FACT: There are no easy answers to this complex issue. In part 1 of the series on myths, we discussed the fact that celibacy does not cause child sexual abuse. However, there appears to be *some truth* to the statement that the priesthood’s celibate lifestyle attracts men with sexual problems.

Those who provide psychological counseling support to clergy report that some men have entered the priesthood, in part, to subconsciously escape their own sexual issues. The problem is that the entire priest population then gets painted with the same broad brush. Such generalizing is both dangerous and unproductive. For example, it could be said that some people enter law enforcement because of a distorted need for power and control. However, this does not mean that all police officers are power hungry and controlling people.

Celibate chastity is a complex issue involving a commitment to channel sexual energy to the unselfish service of others. Most people who take a vow or make a promise of celibate chastity do so as a measure of their dedication to the ministry they have chosen. To broadly assert otherwise because a relatively few individuals *have* abused children does a great disservice to the many clergy and religious who have thoughtfully and prayerfully taken on this commitment in their life of service.

- **MYTH:** The U.S. Bishops are the problem and they still cannot be trusted. They are still not doing what they agreed to do in the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (Charter)* and the *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons (Norms)*.

FACT: Most of the anger and furor in the Church and in the media is aimed at Catholic bishops. The public apparently expected a faster response to the mandates of the Charter.

Americans have a fondness for expecting speedy resolutions to problems. It could be said that we are an impatient people. We often have unrealistic expectations that things will change direction “on a dime” so to speak. Demand for getting what we want now is apparent in many areas of society.

Many of us carry cell phones so we can be in communication anywhere, anytime. We get money from ATM machines and drive-through banking centers so we don’t have to take time to “go to the bank.” We demand a painless adhesive “patch” to eliminate a 30-year-old smoking habit in only two weeks. We have early pregnancy tests, pain medications that deliver faster and faster relief, and high-speed Internet access. We send emails, not traditional letters, and we get annoyed when we have to wait two or three minutes for our fast-food order.

Much of society expected the Church’s response to child sexual abuse to mirror our broad public idea of “quick response” time. And, although the response has in many ways been swift, a large number of people are not satisfied.

The truth is that the bishops have hired a top law enforcement professional to manage the Office for Child and Youth Protection and have established guidelines for compliance, along with an audit process. Many dioceses have implemented comprehensive programs to create safe environments.

However, it is also true that some dioceses have not selected, developed, or implemented safe environment programs yet—while others have made their selections, but have scheduled training sessions for later in the year. At this time, 100 percent compliance does not exist. However, there is overwhelming evidence of a real commitment to altering the way we create and function within our school and church environments.

Sometimes we forget that this is a church that has historically measured change in terms of “centuries.” The progress that the bishops and the USCCB have made is staggering in many respects. There is still a long way to go. But, if people will pause for a moment and look at what has been accomplished, the media and the Catholic faith community will see remarkable strides toward fulfilling both the letter and the intent of both the *Charter* and the *Norms*.

- **MYTH:** The safest thing to do is to remove every priest who ever molested a child from the priesthood. This would prevent the Church from ever again moving an “abuser” priest from parish to parish.

FACT: It is true that if every priest who ever molested a child was laicized or “defrocked,” the Church would be prevented from ever moving him from parish to parish again. Because of the history of bishops moving offending priests around, many think that the first part of this statement is also accurate—that the safest thing to do is to remove every priest who ever molested a child from the priesthood. On this second point, the fact couldn’t be further from the truth.

We must carefully consider whether turning these offending clergy loose on society is the “safest” thing for our children and our neighborhoods. The current policy of the bishops and the Holy See is that any priest convicted of child sexual abuse will be laicized. This policy recognizes that the courts will brand the abuser as a child sex offender and, in most states, will list his name on sex offender registries. His whereabouts in the future will be easy to follow and his location will be tracked to help protect children who could be at risk of harm.

However, the statute of limitations has expired for many of the claims of clergy-related abuse that are coming forward today. There will be no criminal prosecution of these claims, and

therefore, none of these men will be listed on sex offender registries. If the Church laicizes them and turns them loose on society, they will no longer be under the Church's guidance and supervision. Any one of them could move into your neighborhood unidentified, unrecognized, and unsupervised. In that case, nobody's children would be safe. By keeping them within the structure of the Church, the Church is doing the most responsible thing possible, by spending its own resources and capital to prevent these people from having access to children. Better that they be living under the careful supervision and watchful eye of a highly sensitized church, than living alone, perhaps unemployed, next door to you or your child's school.

Final Thoughts

Discerning adults should be wary of any simplistic statements about a complicated issue such as child sexual abuse. There are no easy answers and very few reliable "facts" about victims and/or abusers. If we are to effect the kind of change that is needed to ensure safe environments for our children and the children yet to come, we must continue to identify the facts and dispel the myths.

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