

Witch-hunting does no one any good

We must not imagine things to be worse than they are in the clerical sex abuse scandal

Celia Wolf-Devine | Oct 15 2018 | 



In a recent post I suggested we need to cool down the hysteria about clerical abuse a bit, lest we fly to the other extreme of witch-hunting. Many people responded thinking I was being too soft on paedophilia and not sufficiently outraged.

As a paedophilia victim myself, far be it from me to downplay the damage it can do. But we need to look at the situation a bit more calmly. I noted that a lot of the allegations were very old. I suspected that there are a lot fewer incidents of alleged abuse now.

A recent article in America magazine confirms my suspicion. Analysis of data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate reveals that the peak years of reported incidents of sexual abuse by clergy were 1970-72 and 1975-79. This pattern was also observed in the data from Boston in 2002. The new Pennsylvania data is not included, but there is no reason to suppose the pattern would be radically different. Since then, incidents of reported sexual abuse by clergy has been dropping very sharply, down from 1367 in 1974-79 to 99 in 2005-2009 and 101 in 2010-2014.

As I have already suggested, there are reasons why the problem was not taken seriously enough back then that are no longer tenable. Society in general was more tolerant of paedophilia. Remember *Lolita*? A novel about a middle-aged man's obsession with a 12-year-old girl, it was a best-seller in 1958 and 1959. The reigning philosophy was that making a huge fuss would damage the child more. Such abuse occurred in many other contexts during this time, wherever vulnerable troubled children came under the care of therapists, camp counsellors, baby sitters, scout leaders, etc.

In the case of priests, there were special considerations that would seem to dictate mercy. If the perpetrator made a sincere confession and promised not to do it again, giving him another chance did not seem unreasonable. Indeed, it seemed to be the charitable thing to do. We have since learned that some of the compulsions that moved the perpetrators are deeper and harder to eradicate than people realized. And the damage done to victims has become better known.

Some of the information relied upon by those making decisions is doubtless still under the seal of the confessional, so we can't make definite judgments. But, had bishops known then what we know now,

“covering up” by sending a priest to another parish would probably not have occurred.

Since then, the massive public outcry, the growing awareness of the damage done to victims, as well as the ways in which the church has been obviously harmed by these things have made it harder to pass over cases of alleged abuse. The settlements to victims for their injuries have put a terrible financial strain on the Church, forcing some parishes to close. Also, many parishes have put programs in place to protect vulnerable young people, which are being effective.

This is not to deny that there are some very dark spots in the Church. The corruption of that which is highest is worst, and the Devil is always busy near the altar. But these nests of vice are probably beyond the reach of the average lay person, except through our prayers. People’s emotions are being whipped up by dwelling on cases involving particularly lurid allegations.

It seems to me that this is happening for political reasons. Some people hate the church and/or are violently anti-clerical. Others want to bring down Pope Francis for various reasons. Others have a variety of agendas, from a married priesthood to the defence of capital punishment, that need to be considered on their own merits. The faithful who love the Church are feeling deeply grieved and some are responding by getting into a witch-hunting mood which is likely to do more harm than good.

Priests are thought guilty because accused. But a priest, like anyone else, is innocent until proven guilty and our pastors, most of whom are doing wonderful work, should not have to fear to walk around in a clerical collar lest people snicker and think they are paedophiles. Several priests have recently been severely beaten by assailants saying

things like "this is for the little kids," where there is no suggestion that these particular priests had any personal culpability. These incidents are rightly labelled hate crimes. And an atmospheric suspicion of paedophilia turns young men away from the priesthood, who might otherwise do much for the Church.

In sum: paedophilia and other forms of clerical abuse must not be tolerated. But we should not be steamrolled into imagining things as worse than they are, or creating an environment in which conscientious priests are subjected to unjust suspicion.

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See also her blog Progressive, Pro-Woman, Pro-life.