

# Responding to Allegations of Abuse

The ISTI Sun, V3N2, April 1997 Stephen J Rossetti, PhD, DMin, a Catholic priest, psychologist, noted researcher and author, is the President of Saint Luke Institute, Silver Spring, MD, and charter member of the ISTI Board. This is the second in a series of edited reports from the ISTI Listening Conferences held in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Saint Louis. What do victims want? Many religious organizations have written or are in the process of writing policies for responding to allegations of clerical sexual misconduct. The unstated assumption often is: "If we write a good policy, then our Church will respond well when an allegation surfaces." Unfortunately, this is not true. What victims want and what the public expects from its religious leaders in such circumstances cannot be accomplished by writing a good document. Time and again victims of clergy sexual misconduct will say, "They (the Church) just don't get it!" Despite what appears to be good-faith attempts by Church leaders, many victims continue to be upset with the treatment they have received from religious organizations. On the other hand, Church leaders are often frustrated and point out the many positive steps they have taken. For example, they will note that a statement from the victim was taken; the accused was interviewed; the incident was reported to civil authorities; the alleged perpetrator was put on administrative leave pending a further investigation. What more should they have done? What is it the victims want? During a recent phone conversation, a victim of clergy sexual misconduct complained bitterly to me about the ecclesiastical response to her problem. At one point in our long conversation, she stopped and said, in tears, "The bishop never said he was sorry. He never apologized." Ironically, the same bishop called me a few weeks later to ask about the case, not knowing the victim had previously consulted me. The bishop expressed his frustration with the victim. He then asked if there was anything more that he should do. Without revealing my previous conversation, I asked, "Did you ever apologize to the woman?" He responded, "No. Why should I apologize, I have done nothing wrong. It would be admitting guilt." I responded, "You are not apologizing for yourself. In the name of the Church, you are apologizing for the harm one of its ministers has caused." Some time later, he called and apologized. What is it victims want? First and foremost, victims want to feel heard by the Church. Unfortunately, this is often interpreted by ecclesiastical authorities to mean that someone in the hierarchy sets up a meeting and records the complaint. This misses the point. Victims want the Church to hear their pain and to acknowledge that a wrong has been committed against them. They want

someone to hear the pain, hurt, and sometimes, rage in their hearts. And they want someone to communicate that these feelings are okay. It is common among some victims' groups to eschew using what they call, "the f... word." Surprisingly, what they are referring to is "forgiveness." Sometimes a well meaning pastor will listen to a victim's story and counsel, "Well, let us learn to forgive the perpetrator." What the victims hear from those words is: "it is not OK for you to be angry at the perpetrator; it is not okay to feel hurt." This is the wrong message. When this message is communicated, the victim then has two problems. In the first place, s/he feels guilty and ashamed to have been molested. Now, s/he feels guilty for having the emotions of anger and hurt. To suggest "forgiveness" at this point is premature. Victims want to feel they are heard. But, to "hear" victims means to listen empathetically, to acknowledge their anger and pain, and to admit that the abuse was not the victim's fault. In essence, a bishop or religious leader can begin to "hear" with an acknowledgment of the victim's pain and a heartfelt apology. Several religious organizations have told me they use attorneys to interview an alleged victim. I suggest that an attorney might not be the best choice for the recipient of the victim's complaint. Attorneys typically attend to the legal and financial interests of an organization. They seek to minimize damages. They are accustomed to an adversarial process. They will want the facts, and they will want facts that can be corroborated. Thus, while one cannot deny the legal implications of clerical sexual misconduct, using attorneys as the initial interviewers is courting disaster. ... The persons interviewing the alleged victims need to be trained listeners. They will want to be empathetic, nonjudgmental, and compassionate people. It is important that they not become defensive of the Church or of the perpetrator. Thus, it is often wise not to use a clerical official of the Church. Understandably, Church officials are likely to become defensive in such encounters, sometimes in subtle, unconscious ways. Some Churches enlist the aid of a clinical social worker loosely affiliated with the Church organization. Others choose a pastoral person with a special gift for listening to the pain of others. It is a difficult and courageous step for a victim to come forward and allege clerical sexual misconduct. The Church will want to receive these victims in a safe and nonthreatening environment. This precludes several diocesan officials and an attorney interviewing a frightened victim around a large conference table. Rather, if the victim comes alone or with a support person, the Church will want to have one or two specially trained pastoral or mental health persons receive the victim in a comfortable and confidential setting. Some denominations are providing advocates for the victims as these victims wind their way through complex and often painful allegation procedures. This service is a potentially positive one but it requires that the victim advocate not be perceived as an agent of the Church. One victim who had a Church-

sponsored advocate reflected, "I didn't believe the counselor they sent me to. I thought she was one of them." If counselors and/or advocates are made available to victims at Church expense, it should be the victims who choose them. If a victim has an advocate that s/he trusts, that person can be of great help and support during a difficult time. Providing a safe and nonthreatening environment is important for the initial meeting between the victim and Church representatives. This initial meeting will set the tone for the subsequent relationship between victim and Church. Can Victims and Churches Communicate? More than simply a giving of information, the meeting between the alleged victim and the responsible Church is a dialogue. In this dialogue, two persons bring differing histories and differing agendas. In addition to a story of hurt and betrayal, the victims bring a fear and mistrust of Church leaders. It was a minister who abused them. Why should they trust the Church hierarchy at all? ...In a study that I conducted it was evident that victims are more suspecting of priests. They are more likely to wonder if he has sexual problems or if he is someone they can trust. They are less trusting of the Church with their children. They are less trusting of the Church to take care of problems with its clergy. They are less likely to look to the priesthood or to the Church to provide guidance on sexual issues. And, as a group, they are markedly less satisfied with their priests and with the Catholic Church. While this study focused only on victims of Catholic priests, it is likely that this same decline in trust occurs in other denominations as well (Rossetti, 1995). As a group, victims of clerical sexual abuse have suffered several hurts. They have been hurt by the actual abuse. But, as a group, they have also been hurt by a long history of not being believed and often being blamed by members of the community. In the course of the above study, more than one victim said, "I'm more angry at the Church than I am at the perpetrator." Therefore, in a meeting between Church leaders and a victim of clerical sexual misconduct, it is highly likely that a victim will bring into the meeting a distrust of clerics, an anger toward the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and a difficulty believing that the organization will truly respond in an honest and open way. Even if Church officials say the "right" things, victims will often be suspicious and wait to see if the Church's subsequent actions follow-up on their words. Once the initial trust between a person and the Church is broken, the Church hierarchy will have to re-earn the person's trust. And it is much more difficult to earn the second time. This may seem unfair to current Church leaders who may not have been in office when the original abuse occurred. They often think that victims are being unreasonable. However, there are understandable reasons for victims' mistrust. Re-earning the victims' trust will be an important part of the healing process for both Churches and victims. Conversion of the Church It is not just the victim who needs healing. The Church leadership itself has been wounded and needs to reestablish its

integrity. It will need to reestablish a pastoral relationship of trust within itself and with its congregation. This healing of the Church is more than just implementing good response policies. It demands a process of a conversion, that is, a change in perspective. After watching many Church officials respond to clerical sexual misconduct over the years, it seems to me that there is an identifiable process of conversion that takes place. It occurs roughly in four phases: initial denial, attempts at containment, commitment to justice, victims' advocacy

In Phase I, Church officials have difficulty believing victims' allegations. Sometimes this takes the form of a complete denial. For example, despite allegation after allegation against the same pastor, Church leaders may steadfastly refuse to believe the charges. A more common form of denial is an often-heard remark about victims, "They're just in it for the money." This is said despite the fact that the majority of victims do not ask for monetary damages. Frequently, the denial takes the form of a minimization. Some will minimize the responsibility of the perpetrator by blaming the victim. For example, they might say, "The victim was coming on to the minister." This is sometimes said despite the fact that the victim may have been a young minor or was a very vulnerable adult who trusted the minister in time of great personal need. Another form of minimization is emphasizing the reality of false allegations. It should be noted that there are, indeed, false allegations, particularly when the allegations result from "recovered memories."

Repressed memories can sometimes be recovered and may rightly point out a past case of abuse. Nevertheless, these recovered memories are less credible than a memory of abuse that was never repressed and are more subject to interpretive errors. However, Church leaders have sometimes dismissed the reality of child sexual abuse as a phenomenon promoted by irresponsible therapists and their clients' false memories. This is a minimization of the truth about child sexual abuse. The reality is that the vast majority of allegations of child sexual abuse are true. Similarly, a third form of minimization is not perceiving the widespread nature of sexual misconduct and its potentially devastating effects. While admitting that sexual abuse sometimes happens, Church hierarchies have sometimes downplayed the importance of the issue and how serious its implications are. ... To treat the issue of sexual misconduct as a minor issue that needs passing attention by Church leaders is a type of minimization. Denial and minimization by Church leaders re-victimizes those who have been harmed by clerical sexual misconduct. It also obstructs the healing of the Church. Once the initial denial has been overcome and Church leaders begin to recognize the prevalence and destructiveness of clerical sexual misconduct, they often move into Phase II: Attempts at Containment. Faced with a potentially disastrous situation, Church leaders will then seek to contain the problem, that is, deal with it as quietly and expeditiously as possible. Churches are becoming aware of how damaging public revelations of

such misconduct are. They are acutely aware of how financially costly civil suits can be, particularly in the United States. In Phase II, while admitting the reality of abuse, they seek to limit their liability and to keep a "lid" on the problem. Accordingly, they may try to distance themselves from the perpetrator and his/her actions. This attempt at containment may also take the form of settling civil suits with a "gag" order for the victim, that is, insisting the victim not speak of the abuse publicly. In this phase, Church leaders rarely, if ever, speak about the issue of sexual misconduct publicly. If they do, it is in the face of intense media pressure due to a highly public case of abuse. Even then, their comments are only to assure their congregations that they have the situation well in hand. ...In Phase II, the approach is to limit the public and financial exposure of the Church. Therefore, in this phase, Church hierarchies are still in a reactive and defensive posture. Typically, the law courts, the media and society are demanding a public accountability from ecclesial authorities. They want a greater openness on this issue. And the Church's own congregations are not satisfied with a minimally adequate ecclesial response. They expect their Churches to be led by Gospel values. Satisfying legal requirements is not enough. The Gospel message suggests "going the extra mile" and a special concern for the most vulnerable. Congregants expect Church officials to be pastoral leaders and to offer graciously and generously their ministry of healing. This is especially true when their own leaders have been the source of the hurt and pain. Phase II's attempts at containment are a minimalistic approach driven by legal and public relations concerns. The stance of Church leaders, in this phase, is defensive and self-protective. A Gospel vision has not yet taken over. Some Church hierarchies have moved beyond this defensive posture and have become committed to bringing justice in cases of clerical sexual misconduct. This is Phase III. Occasionally, I have seen Church leaders demonstrate a heart-felt personal commitment to the healing of victims, perpetrators and the wider Church. They seem to be painfully aware of the destruction caused by these breaches of trust and they attempt to do all they can to help. Many times this conversion to Phase III takes place when a Church leader actually sits down with victims of clerical sexual misconduct and truly listens. The victim moves beyond a position of distrust and entrusts his/her pain to this leader, hoping not to be revictimized. The pastoral leader may then be touched by the victim's story and hears the anguish and pain in the victim's heart. This can be a powerful healing moment for both victim and Church leader. There have been many such healing moments between victims and leaders. These moments occur when both victims and pastoral leaders are able to move beyond their own defensiveness and mistrust. They become vulnerable enough to hear the other in a true dialogue. I have had the grace to witness such moments. I believe that the conversion of our Churches and the healing

of victims and Church will ultimately depend upon the mutual vulnerability and dialogue between victims of clerical sexual misconduct and Church leaders. Church leaders and victims need each other. On the other hand, dealing justly with alleged perpetrators is difficult, in some ways even more so than with alleged victims. Clearly, if the allegations are founded, then the ecclesial authorities can and must deal swiftly with the perpetrator. Usually this involves some form of intensive psychotherapy followed by a lifetime limitation of the perpetrator's ministry to exclude contact with the target population. However, if guilt is not established, which is often the case, then it is not easy to know how to respond justly. It is usually the case that an alleged perpetrator will deny the allegations. Sometimes the perpetrator is simply lying; other times there is an intense psychological denial that shields the perpetrator from conscious awareness of the truth; at other times, the allegations will simply be false. Enlisting the aid of experienced clinicians can assist in weighing the allegations. It seems to me that presumption of innocence must be the case unless there is enough substance to the allegations to outweigh the alleged perpetrator's denial. There are many ecclesial organizations that are responding as justly as they are able to alleged victims and perpetrators. Thus, there are a number of Churches that are solidly in Phase III. There has been progress. However, even Phase III is limited. In this phase, Church leaders are simply responding justly to problems after they arise. While Church responses are becoming more open and pastorally sensitive, their stance is still a reactive one. The victim is still the initiator. I suggest that, in Phase III, the Churches have not yet realized their true pastoral missions. The Church Catching Fire There is a fourth phase. I have seen individuals and small sections of Church organizations in this phase. They are an inspiration. This phase reminds me of an Oriental spiritual story about a young man "catching fire." When someone "catches fire," it refers to a fire in the soul. Only a spiritual awakening can enkindle this flame. One cannot artificially produce this enlightenment; it is a mysterious event depending upon what Christians call "grace." But the disciple who searches for this fire can make all the necessary preparations and be ready for its coming. I believe that the presence of God can be felt within all events and situations, even the most disastrous. Or perhaps, I should say, especially within times of great suffering. ... If the Church is truly to be converted in this terrible problem of child sexual abuse, that is, if the Church is truly to "catch fire" and to become Church in its truest, spiritual sense, it will have to move beyond a reactive stance and to become active witnesses to its spiritual mission. What is the Church's ministry regarding sexual misconduct? Rather than simply responding justly to allegations, Churches ought to become proactive. Child sexual abuse is a widespread and terrible evil that carries incalculable damage to our most vulnerable people. More than simply listening empathetically to

victims, I believe that our Churches should become their voice, that is, they should become the "Voice of the Victims." Phase IV occurs when the Churches become "Victims' Advocates." Just as the Churches should be the champion of the poor and the marginalized, the Churches should also be the voice of those who have been devastated by child sexual abuse. And one message that victims of sexual abuse say over and over again, "I do not want this to happen to anyone else." Churches, if they catch fire with the Holy Spirit on this issue, will work with all their might to ensure that sexual abuse does not happen to others. This proactive stance can include a number of actions. A proactive stance will mean preaching and teaching healthy sexuality. There is a need for positive educational programs on human sexuality and for establishing appropriate pastoral boundaries. The Churches will need to promote the proper use of power and authority, especially within its own ranks. The Churches will want to become a leaven in society to raise consciousness about sexual misconduct issues and to become a force for prevention. SR

\_\_\_\_\_ Rossetti, S. (1995). The impact of child sexual abuse on attitudes toward God and the Catholic Church. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 19(11).