

SOME THOUGHTS ON ADVOCACY AND ACCURACY

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In recent years the Inquirer has done a variety of valuable reporting and editorializing on sex abuse in the Catholic Church and past failures by the Church to root out abusers and to protect the innocent. The entire public – including Catholics – can be grateful for that.

I arrived in Philadelphia just months after a harsh 2011 grand jury report, and since then (but starting well before then) the archdiocese has worked hard to reform its victim outreach efforts, safety standards, handling of abuse allegations and cooperation with law enforcement.

None of this has been window dressing. The suffering of past abuse victims is a deep scar on the witness of the Church, and one that will take generations to redeem. The priests, deacons, religious and bishops of this diocese love their people and are committed to protecting them. The archdiocese, its ministries and its resources are no more and no less than the people who sustain its parishes. *They* make Catholic services possible, and *they* – not some disembodied religious corporation -- bear the burden of unjust penalties and laws.

Truth is always a good thing. So it's been odd to notice that the Inquirer has often seemed less committed to reporting the history, roots, scope and intractability of chronic sexual abuse problems in our public schools, institutions and society at large – and even less interested in what the Church has done and is doing to deal with the problem.

Since 2002, the archdiocese has committed more than \$13 million to victim assistance for individuals and families, including counseling and other mental health related services, help with medications, necessary travel and childcare.

Professionals in the victim advocacy field administer our archdiocesan Victim Assistance Program. The focus is on healing. It doesn't matter when the abuse occurred, and no limit exists on how long the assistance is offered. Counselors and therapists, independent of the archdiocese, establish each person's plan based on the unique needs of each individual. We've invested another \$6 million in abuse prevention efforts that include educational programming for tens of thousands of children and adults in our schools and parishes, as well as screenings and background checks through state and federal law enforcement agencies. All of these efforts are on-going.

Yet these facts have routinely been ignored or underreported by media in the public sphere. Despite ample evidence of the scope of the sexual abuse problem beyond the Catholic Church, some continue to perpetuate the lie that the sexual abuse of minors is lopsidedly a "Catholic" problem and that the Church has done little to address it. This is flatly, *demonstrably* false. In a November 1 editorial, the Inquirer even claimed that "the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the insurance industry have long fought efforts to hold abusers accountable for past crimes." Again, this is flatly, *demonstrably* false. Any person who criminally abuses a child should be punished by law.

The Inquirer's report "*Stolen Childhoods*" (October 26), focusing on the pattern of abuse committed by the late former priest James Brzyski, was – quite rightly – emotionally charged and difficult to read, most of all for the survivors and the family and friends of the men victimized by one individual's loathsome actions. But the story virtually ignored the truth that our Church family has worked honestly and vigorously to remedy the abuse problem for many years. And the archdiocese, despite being prominently mentioned in the Inquirer article, was not even contacted by the reporters.

The Brzyski story – subsequently highlighted in the Inquirer's October 29 Sunday edition – was a classic example of aggressive advocacy journalism. And it fits seamlessly into larger efforts to abolish Pennsylvania's *civil* statute of limitations. This would open the way to pursuing massive litigation and financial penalties against the Church. That may sound "just" to some, but the opposite is true. As we've said and seen in the past, the people who will bear the resulting financial burdens of such punitive legislation are not the actual abusers, or faceless corporate executives. The penalties will be borne by innocent families, individuals and clergy in the field, because whatever the archdiocese and our parishes have in terms of resources is held in trust for our people. It's *their* money.

Let me be clear: Sexual abuse is a grave evil and a crime, and one case involving the sexual abuse of a minor is one case too many. The Church is committed to the safety of our young people. The archdiocese has a zero tolerance policy for abuse of minors and reports any allegations of such abuse to law enforcement. We urge anyone who has been abused, no matter when the abuse occurred, to come forward and report that abuse to law enforcement. As a matter of policy, the Archdiocese reports any suspected crime to law enforcement. We do not object to a measure that would lift the criminal statute of limitations for sex crimes prospectively. We want those who have been harmed, no matter how long ago, to get the help they need and we want those guilty of criminal acts to face appropriate justice.

Among the most difficult but important moments of my time as a bishop have been the private meetings I've had with victims of sexual abuse. Their pain and struggle are real, and I admire their courage. As we talk, and sometimes pray together, we try to find a path toward healing. My hope is that our time together sincerely conveys not just my personal sorrow for the evil done to them, but also the wholehearted dedication of today's clergy, archdiocesan staff and our entire Church family to the safety all those entrusted to our care.

The Church has an obligation to honestly root out and prevent sexual abuse in the life of her parishes and schools. Surely the same obligation might be helpful in the media coverage of her efforts.

For assistance with healing, individuals may contact the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's Office for Child and Youth protection at 1-888-800-8780 or philavac@archphila.org.