

## [News](#)



Statues on Bernini's colonnade at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City (Marco Verch/Creative Commons)

Jack Jenkins

[View Author Profile](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

### **[Join the Conversation](#)**

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

August 17, 2018

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

When Pennsylvania officials [unveiled](#) a report this week detailing accusations that Catholic priests had sexually abused more than 1,000 children since the 1940s and that church officials shielded the abusers, the public outcry was swift. Some compared the document to The Boston Globe's 2002 "Spotlight" investigation, which unearthed comparably horrifying allegations in Massachusetts.

But two days after the report's release, questions remain as to what effect, if any, it will have on American Catholicism or whether it will impact how states prosecute clergy sexual abuse in the future.

Fr. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and editor at large at America Magazine, predicted fallout from the revelations could be as far-reaching as what followed the Spotlight stories.

"We can already see the convulsive effect it has had on the church in this country," he told RNS by email. "People are nauseated, and that includes people far from Pennsylvania. ... People are more disgusted than they were in 2002, if that's possible."

Catholics are already expressing dismay. Alice Niles, who lives near Philadelphia, said she called her parish and altered her contributions to the church after reading the report. She said she still supports her parish but wants to find a way to prevent her funds from being used by church authorities to protect predators.

"I'm really afraid I'll have blood on my hands," she said.

Suzanne Gillies-Smith, who grew up around Philadelphia and is expecting her first child, had been planning a Catholic baptism for the baby. But after reading the report, Gillies-Smith, who lives in Indiana now, is not sure she will remain Catholic at all.

"To share my childhood and my family identity with my child we may attend a Mass or two, though I will not financially support the Church and I will not choose to baptize my child in the church," she said in an email.

In 2011, after reading reports of abuse that had taken place in her hometown, Gillies-Smith said she threw up twice but continued going to Mass. But she will not be attending Mass this weekend and may attend an Episcopal church.

"The thought of even looking at a person in authority within the church makes my stomach uneasy," she said. "The one thing I know I could do is affirm that I believe all of the victims, known and unknown. That I believe that it is those victims who represent God here, not the hundreds of priests who abused them."

## Advertisement

Sarah, a recent convert to Catholicism living in North Carolina who did not want her full name used, also said she was "horrified and repulsed" by the report.

"I think evil is the only word I could find that would come close" to describing the accounts, she said in an email. She also noted that she would not attend St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh, as she typically does, and said she no longer trusts priests.

"I don't think I could renounce the practice of Catholicism, but it will be hard for me to ever attend Mass again," she said.

Whether such accounts represent a vocal minority or a sea change in the church remains to be seen, but church officials are already mustering their own response. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops unveiled a [new plan](#) Thursday (Aug. 16) to address the "moral catastrophe" in the church.

The USCCB's president, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese, said leaders "need to develop and widely promote reliable third-party reporting mechanisms" for allegations made against church officials, and he noted that any effort should rely heavily on lay Catholics.

"We are faced with a spiritual crisis that requires not only spiritual conversion, but practical changes to avoid repeating the sins and failures of the past that are so evident in the recent report," DiNardo wrote.



Cardinal Daniel DiNardo speaks at a news conference Nov. 13, 2017, in Baltimore. (AP/Patrick Semansky)

The precise details of this strategy remain unclear, but the Vatican echoed its sentiment on Thursday — after [two days of silence](#) — in a statement.

"Regarding the report made public in Pennsylvania this week, there are two words that can express these horrible crimes: shame and sorrow," read a statement from Vatican spokesman Greg Burke. "The Church must learn hard lessons from its past, and there should be accountability for both abusers and those who permitted abuse to occur."

Other states are considering their own investigations, even as Pennsylvania lawmakers take on the [policy changes](#) recommended by the grand jury that issued this week's report, such as eliminating the criminal statute of limitations for sexually abusing children and making it legal for victims to sue for civil damages after age 30.

A representative from the New Jersey attorney general's office said officials are actively "reviewing the grand jury report and the work undertaken by the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office to determine what, if any, additional actions

are appropriate in New Jersey."

Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi said her office is investigating possible courses of action, despite operating under a different legal structure from Pennsylvania's. "In Florida, these matters are typically handled by the 20 elected state attorneys, however, my Statewide Prosecutor is reaching out to all of the state attorneys to explore the matter," Bondi told RNS in a statement.

New York Attorney General Barbara Underwood's office released a statement lauding the Pennsylvania report and saying she had "directed her Criminal Division leadership to reach out to local District Attorneys — who are the only entities that currently have the power to convene a grand jury to investigate these matters — in order to establish a potential partnership on this issue."

Mitchell Garabedian, a storied child abuse lawyer who played a key role in the Globe's Spotlight investigation, said changes to state laws could have a major impact.

"I think there needs to be amendments in the statute of limitations so that justice can be obtained, transparency can be accomplished and victims can try to heal," Garabedian told RNS.

In the meantime, Martin said the church shouldn't wait for the laws to change, but move quickly to atone.

"It's a time for confession, and in the traditional Catholic understanding of that sacrament, that includes penance. Some real penance must happen for this to be meaningful at all," he said.