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We've only just begun

Nicole Sotelo | Feb. 19, 2009

"That's all behind us," Cardinal Roger Mahony assured Catholics in Los Angeles on a radio station last month. It was the day after news broke that the archdiocese was under federal investigation regarding its response to sexual abuse. The archdiocese had settled with more than 500 sexual abuse survivors in 2007. The cardinal offered an apology. So the sexual abuse crisis is behind us, but only if we think that is the whole story. It's not.

As part of the settlement, the cardinal's office promised to release the documents related to the cases. The documents have yet to be released. It's been two years. So it's not behind us. In fact, the long road to creating a safe church has only just begun.

The 2002 *Boston Globe* revelations and the watershed in our knowledge about sexual abuse in our church was a catalyzing moment. Any social movement has one of those dramatic moments that reveals years of suffering and launches a new phase in the movement. Think Rosa Parks sitting down. Think Gandhi standing up. And then think of the years that linger ahead of those moments as the hard work of transformation continues. We're still trying to eradicate racism. We're still trying to eliminate the effects of colonialism. And we're still trying to create a church that protects the vulnerable and heals the wounded.

Sexual abuse settlements, prevention programs and apologies are a start, but the real movement to create a safe church must address the deeper roots of the problem: secrecy and loyalty to a church hierarchy, rather than to the people of God.

Bishop Wilton Gregory addressed this seven years ago when he spoke to his fellow bishops: "We are the ones who worried more about the possibility of scandal than bringing about the kind of openness that helps prevent abuse" (Statement by President of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Sexual Abuse, June 13, 2002).

Unfortunately, seven years later, the soil of secrecy and non-accountability in which the sexual abuse crisis developed still exists.

Just last month, Cardinal George in the Chicago archdiocese attempted to seal court records regarding a convicted pedophile so that the details would not be made public. This comes five months after the archdiocese once again pledged to be open with clergy sexual abuse cases.

Two weeks ago, the Charlotte archdiocese fired a teacher after a five-month investigation into an allegation of sexual abuse. However, the diocese is refusing to release the name of the teacher which, if shared, could prompt further abuse survivors of this teacher to come forward.

On Feb. 4,, it was reported that Cardinal Mahony is trying to prevent an Iraqi war veteran from bringing his case of sexual abuse to court. The veteran was fighting in Iraq between 2002 and 2003 during the window in California when old cases could be brought forward. Thanks to the Servicemember's Civil Relief Act, veterans are able to file court cases after they return home so that they do not have to cease their military duty to make court dates. Other victims of clergy sexual abuse have found use of this act a successful strategy in pressing

their cases, as the recent $1.7 million settlement against the Crosiers in Minnesota shows. But Cardinal Mahony's lawyers are asking a judge to rule against this law so that this veteran will not be allowed his day in court.

Additionally, not one bishop in the United States has been disciplined for his actions in the cover up and the knowing transfer of pedophiles from one job to the next. If bishops were school principals who knowingly allowed teachers to rape multiple children, the principals would have been removed immediately. Instead, no bishop has been removed from ministry for what would normally be considered criminal behavior.

For years the church and media have referred to the sexual abuse revelations as a "crisis." It is. The word for crisis in Chinese is written as two characters: danger and opportunity. A crisis usually results in a response to the danger and a crisis could persist if that danger is not addressed.

However, crisis is also an opportunity. The sexual abuse crisis is an opportunity for our church to recognize the pervasive abuse that exists in our homes, schools, churches and streets. It is an opportunity to create a church that is a model of openness, safety, justice and healing for all abuse survivors. And we, as a church, have the opportunity and responsibility to call our leaders to this mission. So, no, Cardinal Mahony, the sexual abuse crisis and the movement to create a safe church is not "all behind us." In fact, we've only just begun.

If you are a survivor, find support with SNAP, the Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests (www.snapnetwork.org) and other religious leaders.

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[1] http://www.WomenHealing.com