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Disagreement on why abuse warnings were ignored

Tom Roberts | Apr. 13, 2009

The Servants of the Paraclete complex in Jemez Springs, N.M., in 1993 (Jeffrey D. Scott)

Two priests who have played prominent roles in attempting to understand the clergy sex-abuse crisis come to very different conclusions about why the early warnings regarding sexually abusive priests by Fr. Gerald Fitzgerald, founder of the Servants of the Paracletes, went unheeded.

Msgr. Stephen J. Rossetti, president and CEO of St. Luke Institute, a facility that treats problem priests, believes Fitzgerald was ignored because he was a lone voice speaking out of an emotional reaction to the abuse, not from scientifically sound information. Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, on the other hand, long a critic of the church?s handling of the crisis, said Fitzgerald was ignored because the bishops preferred not to confront the problem.

During the 1950s and 1960s when Fitzgerald headed the Paracletes, an order founded to assist wayward priests, he repeatedly pleaded with U.S. bishops and the Vatican not to allow them to return to their ministries, firmly holding that they would offend again.

Yet Fitzgerald?s insistent warnings never seemed to make the necessary impression and never were taken into consideration as bishops formed policy.
Since early coverage of the clergy abuse scandal in the mid-1980s, which appeared largely in the National Catholic Reporter, until 2002, when the bishops took up the issue during a meeting in Dallas following new media revelations about clergy abuse and cover-up in Boston, church leaders routinely transferred abusive priests from parish to parish and diocese to diocese. The bishops said they thought the priests would amend their ways.

Meanwhile, Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, spokesperson for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said, ?As I looked at the documentation, it shows certainly the insidiousness of the disease, and it reinforces current church policy? as outlined in a charter developed during the Dallas meeting.

She noted that Fitzgerald was not consulting the psychological community at the time. ?The bishops from everything I can tell were trying to do the right thing by taking the advice of the psychological and medical community,? she said. ?When it became clear they couldn?t, we have the charter,? a document drawn up at the Dallas meeting.

Walsh, in a phone interview, was speaking of Fitzgerald?s correspondence, first made widely public in NCR?s April 3 issue. Fitzgerald founded the Paracletes in 1947 initially with the aim to care for priests who had problems with alcohol. Soon he began to receive requests from bishops to care for priests with sexual disorders, especially those who had abused children.

By at least 1952, according to documents that NCR secured from a California law firm, Fitzgerald had come to the conclusion that ?I myself would be inclined to favor laicization for any priest, upon objective evidence, for tampering with the virtue of the young. ? Leaving them on duty or wandering from diocese to diocese is contributing to scandal or at least to the approximate danger of scandal.?

Fitzgerald became so convinced of the danger and of the possibility of widespread scandal that he pursued the purchase of an island on which to sequester offenders so they could live their priestly lives far from any opportunities to molest children. Though he actually placed a down payment on a remote island in the Caribbean, his bishop blocked the idea and made him sell it.

Fitzgerald?s views, as outlined in letters to numerous bishops, Vatican officials and Pope Paul VI, seem to contradict the consistent explanation by contemporary bishops that they moved abusive priests from parish to parish because they were acting on the best information of the day ? that priests could be cured ? and because no one at the time realized the potential dangers.

?I think people need to be reasonable about what we knew and what we didn?t know? in the ?50s and ?60s, said Rossetti of St. Luke Institute, which has treated hundreds of priests who have abused children.

Back then, he told NCR in an April 7 interview, psychiatric therapies amounted to ?thorazine in the hip and free association.? He said he ?had never heard of this guy [Fitzgerald] or what he was saying? prior to the recent reports in NCR, but ?to say that the field of child sex-abuse prevention has not made light-years of progress? since the Fitzgerald letters ?is not the truth.?

He said Fitzgerald?s statements regarding relapse ?are not always accurate. ? Some of the men are very likely to relapse and some of them are not.?
Rossetti, who has written and spoken extensively about the clergy sex-abuse problem, said, ?The notion that we should send them all to an island is basically nonsense. We need to find out who is going to relapse and who is not.? Limited resources, he said, should be focused on those ?not likely to relapse.?

According to St. Luke statistics, he said, from 1985 through 2008, a total of 365 priests went through treatment for child sex abuse at the facility, and 22 of them, or 6 percent, relapsed, he said.

?I think the problem is if you take Fr. Fitzgerald?s statements as somehow intellectually sound research statements, they?re not. They?re emotional, non-scientifically made statements.?

Fitzgerald actually was opposed to consultation with psychologists and other experts, preferring more spiritual means of dealing with the problem. But he clearly recognized the danger to children and to the reputation of the church and the priesthood if such men were allowed to return to normal ministry.

In 1957, Fitzgerald wrote of the Paracletes? intent to stop taking sexual abusers, a resolve that did not last. ?Experience has taught us these men are too dangerous to the children of the parish and neighborhood for us to be justified in receiving them here.? Of such men, he wrote to another bishop explaining that their repentance ?is superficial and, if not formally at least subconsciously, is motivated by a desire to be again in a position where they can continue their wonted activity.?

Rossetti, in response to a question, said he didn?t know how the warnings had been lost in the church?s attempt to understand the problem. He added, however, that awareness about sexual abuse of children, like other social threats such as destruction of the environment whose dangers may at first be misunderstood or go unnoticed, ultimately reached ?a tipping point.?

One person talking about such a danger may not be persuasive, he said, but larger numbers joining in recognizing the threat may bring about change. ?One article in The New York Times is not going to change perspective. If there?s a slew of articles, they could be persuasive,? he said.

The awareness of the sex-abuse problem grew over time, he said. ?To say that the bishops were doing nothing, hearing nothing, is not true.? He said the bishops listened as a group to reports from experts for the first time in 1985 and again in 1992 and ?93 and during the Dallas meeting of 2002, following a series of articles in The Boston Globe based on documents showing the extent of the sex-abuse crisis and cover-up of the problem by the hierarchy in the Boston archdiocese. The meeting resulted in strict new rules and procedures for dealing with the problem, for protecting children and for beginning to determine the problem?s extent and causes.

Doyle, one of the few clerics to warn church officials early on of the dangers of priests who were sexual predators, first saw some of the Fitzgerald letters when they showed up during legal proceedings in several cases against priests. Doyle, a canon lawyer, for years has served as an expert witness for victims suing the church.

?They showed that Fitzgerald knew these men need to be defrocked,? said Doyle, ?and he said it explicitly because of the damage they would do to the body of Christ. And he was ignored and resisted by the bishops.

?I don?t think the bishops ever wanted to confront this head-on,? he said. ?Whatever the direction of the response of the clergy to sex abuse, it has to be on their terms and their terms only.?

Doyle said the documents show the bishops were put on notice ?five decades ago that this is a very serious problem.? He said the only reason they acted in 2002 ?is because they were forced to take action because of public outrage ? of the media and the courts. If those things had not come into play, nothing would have happened.?

The documents will have a future effect on court cases, said Doyle, ?because they will be used more and more by attorneys to counteract the bishops? claim that they never knew anything, and they will play a part in the growing realization on the part of the laity that this problem is much deeper and broader than anyone thought.?

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