

## Sex abuse ... drip, drip, drip

Tom Roberts | May. 26, 2009 NCR Today

One has to wonder, given the string of events that have occurred during the past four months, whether the clergy sexual abuse has quietly reached a new stage, one that may yet drive the church to a deeper examination of the scandal's causes.

I was talking today with Patrick Wall, a former Benedictine priest and a canon lawyer who currently works as a senior consultant for a California law firm that has represented hundreds of alleged victims. He thinks the crisis, given the recent government report from Ireland about horrific abuse in Catholic-run institutions over more than half a century, has reached a new level.

He noted other events of recent months:

It became known at the beginning of the year that a federal grand jury was investigating how the Los Angeles archdiocese handled accusations that dozens of priests molested hundreds of teenagers and younger children over many years. No one is talking and there is only speculation about what angle the federal prosecutor is taking or what statutes may have been violated.

In late February, the news broke that the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus, facing hundreds of claims of sexual abuse by Jesuits over a 60-year-period, has filed for bankruptcy.

Wall said the accused Jesuits in that region included priests from 11 different provinces and three foreign countries.

More recently, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that more than 12,000 pages of documents detailing sexual abuse allegations against priests of the Diocese of Bridgeport must be released.

The papers have to do with 23 lawsuits against six priests. They've been sealed since the cases were settled in 2001, but several newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Hartford Courant*, have been seeking the documents. A state Superior Court judge ruled in 2006 that the documents should be unsealed but the diocese appealed to the state Supreme Court. It is unknown, given the most recent ruling, when the documents will finally be released.

Perhaps the strategy of the bishops is to stand and fight and die a thousand deaths. Maybe it is a new part of the scandal, he said, noting that Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles appears to continue to fight a court order that documents be released as a part of an earlier settlement and other bishops are fighting efforts to alter state statutes of limitation so that alleged victims would be given the opportunity to file civil proceedings.

And across the pond, the warning's been sent to expect yet another humbling report, this one on clergy sex abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin.

The Ryan report, said Wall, is everything we ever feared and more. It is a confirmation of the tragedy that I and others have personally heard about from survivors for the past decade. It shows there was a culture of

secrecy and sexual depravity within the clerical culture.?

So far, church authorities have been able to ride out the bad news and the court rulings and grand jury findings without ever taking a serious look at the culture that generated the scandal and protected the perpetrators.

Could that change as the drip, drip, drip of information continues? How many more revelations can the clergy culture withstand before even those on the inside demand a serious examination of how it has worked in the past and how it so widely condoned such behavior?

Wall suggests three possibilities: the pope himself convenes a meeting to establish the mandate and set the direction for such an investigation; or he appoints the U.S. nuncio to conduct such a gathering, or he places the task in the hands of a special legate.

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