

Oblates of St. Francis de Sales target of abuse suits

Tom Roberts | Jul. 6, 2009 NCR Today

Perhaps it was an inevitability, simply a matter of time, before the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales in the Eastern U.S., got caught up in the ugliness of the sex abuse scandal.

An article in yesterday's [The Morning Call of Allentown, Pa., details](#) [1]some of the charges involved in "nearly 30 lawsuits alleging that 10 priests had for years sexually abused students at Oblate-run high schools in Delaware and Pennsylvania."

During a recent discussion with a priest about the damage the sex abuse crisis had done to the church and the deep scars it had left on some members of the community, he stopped and said, "Still, you are who you are because of the church."

And he was, to a great degree correct. Much of who I am is because of my education at the hands of nuns and priests, including the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales at their only college, now called De Sales University (and back then known as Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales). I was a member of the second class to attend the college. I arrived in September of 1966, when there were a few buildings, lots of spindly trees, mud, cornerstones still lying on the ground waiting for a ceremony, and, it seemed then, miles of sidewalks leading to nowhere.

The men who started the place in what must have been an exercise of idealism and a leap of hope in the future, were, in most instances, men of great breadth and substance and they fleshed out a potent vision of Christian humanism and intellectual inquiry. But even in those early years the projects of these men (and they were incredibly patient with the comings and goings of this less-than-stellar scholar whose attention was yanked hither and yon at the slightest provocation) was badly timed. The seminary on the hill across the street from the college, which plays a role in the story of abuse and errant clergy behavior detailed in the news story, was buffeted almost before it was completed by the winds of change blowing through the church and the wider culture.

Before too many years had lapsed, many of the men who taught me had left the order, as had many of the seminarians. The end of the Vietnam era and the clergy and seminarian exodus that occurred through the 1970s and early 1980s pretty much doomed the place as a seminary. It never really got going as it was intended.

The college, I am led to believe, flourishes today, a place rich in a diversity of programs -- from business to science to the arts.

In all the reams of coverage I've produced and edited over the years regarding the sex abuse crisis, this is different.

I share a bit more in the shock of this, not because I knew any of those abused or accused -- and I hope all have a day in court to establish the truth -- but because I understand perhaps in a more visceral way in this case the disturbing nature of the news, the realization that among this community of men some may have harmed the innocent. I understand more deeply in this case than in others how such behavior offends the order's charism

and aspirations as I have known them.

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[1] http://www.mcall.com/news/local/all-a1_5oblates.6931045jul05,0,3812599.story?page=1