NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Archbishop Tomasi's indefensible defense

Tom Roberts | Sep. 29, 2009 NCR Today

Public relations has never been the Vatican's strong suit, but one would think by now that someone would have sent out the memo advising against defending the church's activity in the sex abuse scandal by pointing the finger at everyone else.

But there was Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican's permanent observer to the UN, defending [1] the church's handling of the crisis by citing suspect numbers (only 1.5-5 percent of priests involved), questionable social science (most of the perpetrators were homosexual) and the thin consolation that sex abuse exists not only in the wider culture but in other religions and denominations.

What Archbishop Tomasi has to say about sex abuse might be of little consequence (someone ought to at least brief him on it beyond an article in The Christian Science Monitor before he decides to pronounce on the matter again) except that he's at the United Nations and thus can command a sizeable megaphone. That it is not his role to analyze the subject nor pronounce on it is of little matter. He's an archbishop and he's in an important position, so for too many he becomes the latest official voice of the church on the topic.

That's an unfortunate result because such a nonsensical defense leaves those outside the church muttering to themselves and finding reason to dismiss the church on so many other scores. It also merely stokes the anger of those within the church who know, as apparently the good archbishop does not, that long ago the scandal moved beyond the particulars of who assaulted whom and whether they were true pedophiles, homosexuals, ephebophiles or from some other place on the spectrum of sexual orientation or predilection.

What fuels the seemingly unending anger and discontent is the fact that those in charge -- pastors, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, even Pope John Paul II -- remained deaf to the complaints of the abused and over decades went to great lengths to protect the perpetrators.

Those who understand this story wish that those like Archbishop Tomasi, who are moved to pronounce indignantly on the subject, would first read the documents that have so far been produced. They're available at bishopaccountability.org. Read the Philadelphia Grand Jury report, read the thousands of pages out of Boston, read the documents from the Paracletes warning of the dangers of priests who abuse children, read the long accounts of the Legionaries of Christ founder Fr. Marciel Maciel and the deceptions and fraud that he masterminded over decades as a sexual predator. Such information might demonstrate how preposterous it is to suggest to Catholics that they should somehow be less indignant about the sex abuse crisis within the church because it also occurs elsewhere.

Perhaps the next church authority tempted to pronounce in the same manner might stop for a second and imagine what he would say should a Catholic lay person approach him and suggest that the church not get so upset about such matters as birth control or divorce or abortion because other churches had far less rigid teachings about those subjects.

As a rabbi, commenting on Tomasi's remarks, said: "Comparative tragedy is a dangerous path on which to

travel."

Indeed. While the church has taken admirable steps to deal with the symptoms of the crisis -- making training mandatory and doing background checks and the like -- the much deeper issue, the question of how the institution reached the point where it could protect such crimes for so long while ignoring the pleas of victims, is yet to be answered. It is a question that gets at the heart of our community life and the trust that should exist between laity and clergy. It is a question that demands a deep examination of the clerical, especially hierarchical, culture, its sense of privilege and how, in the future, it might be held accountable.

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[1] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/28/sex-abuse-religion-vatican