

Lessons from the clergy sexual abuse crisis

Suzanne Morse | Oct. 2, 2009 NCR Today

The past two weeks have brought attention to the sexual abuse of young people and children through two very high profile cases: actress Mackenzie Phillips's allegations that her father John Phillips raped her at the age of 19 and then subsequently they had a "consensual" sexual relationship thereafter and the arrest of director Roman Polanski 31 years after he pled guilty to the statutory rape of a 13 year old.

I believe that Catholics have a special obligation to understand the damage of sexual abuse and to promote both justice and healing. As a church, the damage wrought by the clergy sexual abuse crisis has been substantial -- there remains a lot of anger and feeling that justice has not been served, especially against those who covered up these crimes for decades.

The sexual exploitation of young people is a problem that extends far beyond the Catholic church. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 1 in 4 young women and 1 in 6 young men face some kind of sexual assault throughout their childhood. One of the few positive elements that has emerged out of the crisis is a better understanding among many Catholics about how sexual abuse happens and its impact on a family, a community, and a society. Many of the lessons learned can be applied to the two cases that have captured the public's attention.

1. Accusers are always doubted -- both Mackenzie Phillips and Roman Polanski's victim continue to have their stories doubted. Some of those doubts are not only coming from the public but from their own families. Both Phillips's stepmother Michelle and her sister Bijoux have put out statements publicly expressing their doubt in her story.

Samantha Geimer, who came forward years ago to tell her story of the night Polanski raped her, also continues to be doubted. In her case, friends of Polanski have blamed the incident on her mother, claiming that Geimer's mother was a "stage mother" who pushed her daughter into these events. They have also used the fact that Geimer has said she would like the charges to be dropped to imply that they should never have been brought in the first place.

Survivors of clergy sexual abuse have spent decades hoping that their stories would be believed. Not every case is going to be true but, as Catholics, I believe we have a special obligation to never dismiss out of hand an allegation of sexual abuse.

2. You can't always predict a perpetrator -- the myth is that sexual predators can't be anything more than sexual predators. That they don't have lives beyond their crimes. But the truth is that even sexual predators can produce brilliant works of art -- John Phillips and Roman Polanski are proof of that, as is Michael Jackson, who was also alleged to have had inappropriate sexual conduct with minors.

Defrocked priest Paul Shanley was considered to be a charismatic guy who connected with young people living on the streets before it was discovered that he was also a predator. Fr. Marcial Maciel founded and

built a whole priestly order, the Legion of Christ, even while accusations against him swirled.

As I said above, not every allegation is true, and many Catholic priests have suffered from the stigma of the unfair idea that all priests are involved in sexual misconduct. But, as Catholics, we should recognize that abusers don't wear a scarlet letter on their sleeve that identifies them as a predator. An individual can both be capable of doing (or creating) good works while also committing a crime. If there are credible allegations and evidence against them, those good works cannot be considered proof that said person is incapable of committing such acts.

3.tSexual abuse has long-standing negative effects -- Mackenzie Phillips has spent years trying to recover from drug abuse. In a 2003 interview with Larry King, Geimer talked of the trauma associated with the criminal case and with the resulting publicity and how that is part of the reason why she wants the issue resolved. Geimer, for the most part, has had a productive life but, in that, she is more fortunate than many victims of sexual abuse. For survivors, the very fact that they struggle with addiction is often used against them.

Many survivors of clergy sexual abuse have struggled with addiction issues. The suicide rate among survivors is much higher than it is among the general population. Survivors have higher rates of divorce and depression as well. Families are torn apart, communities are harmed, and as a society, we all end up dealing with the public health issues associated with the sexual abuse of children. The Catholic community has seen firsthand the damage abuse causes and should continue to find ways to end it.

The sexual exploitation of children -- from a family member or a trusted friend or a member of the clergy -- is a subject that makes everyone uncomfortable. But it remains a true crisis in our society? and in our Church. We have learned a lot from the clergy sexual abuse crisis. As Catholics, we are called to act on our awareness and our greater understanding of it, including working to help prevent sexual abuse and to bring those who perpetrate it to justice.

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