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It's time to put away the stones

by Nicole Sotelo

Bishops have stones in their hands aimed at women religious in the United States under the pretext of the apostolic visitation. But the revelations of sexual abuse across the European continent, with the cover-up potentially implicating the Pope himself, begs Jesus' well-known maxim: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7).

Last weekend, a German newspaper broke the news that, in the early 1980s, Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger of Munich -- now Pope Benedict XVI -- was allegedly responsible for harboring a priest after he had committed sexual acts with a minor.

The survivor says that he was assured the priest would no longer be placed in ministry with children. Instead, after a few months of therapy, the diocese placed the priest back into ministry where more abuse took place. He was convicted in 1986 and returned to ministry yet again. It was not until this week, 24 years after his conviction, that the diocese finally removed the offending priest from parish ministry, leaving untold numbers of abuse survivors in his wake.

In chilling news, Italian media are reporting that preceding the priest's removal this week, he had recently returned from a camping trip with a group of young people. I am praying for those young ones.

The Vatican, in a weak attempt to show its record on handling abuse cases, issued a weekend report published in *L'Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference. Msgr. Charles Scicluna, who handles abuse cases for the Vatican, explained that all told, 3,000 cases, many from the United States, have been sent to the Vatican over the last nine years. It is undeniable that this represents only a small portion of what is a crisis of global proportions.

In the United States alone, there were more than 10,000 allegations of sexual abuse by clergy reported between 1950 and 2002, according to the John Jay study of 2004. I am sure that there are thousands more

cases in the United States and across the globe where survivors remain afraid to speak out, have committed suicide because they were unable to bear the trauma or have since passed away.

Despite the immense number of reported cases, the Vatican has not disciplined and removed any of the bishops responsible for harboring abusive priests or covering up their crimes.

If any investigation is to go on in our church, it should not be the apostolic visitation against women religious, one that sorely reflects the biblical story in which a woman is brought into a temple and condemned by a group of men without a chance to tell her story.

Instead, the investigation most needed by our church today is one by impartial governmental officials to uncover the extent of abuse and cover-up committed by clergy, women religious and other ministerial leaders.

The bishops cannot do their own investigation. When allegations of cover-up rise to include the highest official in an institution, that same official must recuse himself and his staff from conducting the probe.

Instead of taking women to task in the temple, our church needs those who have been raping, abusing and hiding the crimes to be taken to court. And we need to stand, not with stones in our hands, but armed simply with the truth.

The biblical story says that after Jesus admonishes the men not to throw stones, they recognized their sins and "went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest" (John 8:9). Vatican officials should heed Jesus' words and walk away from the investigation of women religious. Bishops, it's time to put away the stones. Instead, it's far beyond time for the truth.

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If you know of abuse taking place or are a survivor, contact SNAP at 877.762.7432 or SNAPDORRIS@gmail.com.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates www.WomenHealing.com. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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