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What a difference a week makes

Sr. Maureen Paul Turlish | Mar. 29, 2010

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Commentary

I had been out of the loop, as it were, since Monday, March 22, when I left for Alabama to attend the 26th annual symposium on child abuse sponsored by the National Children's Advocacy Center headquartered in Huntsville. I made the mistake of not taking my laptop, thinking that I could check my e-mail on the hotel's computer. That did not work out.

As a result, I couldn't open my e-mail, couldn't read *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Tablet* of London, or even *National Catholic Reporter*.

I was in the dark until early afternoon Thursday while I waited for my connecting flight from Washington to Philadelphia. That was when I caught some news from CNN and I realized that that sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy was all over the news..

What a difference a week makes!

I immediately began calling friends in Delaware and Philadelphia to find out what was going on at the Holy See, with the pope and what was all this about deaf children in Wisconsin?

What a difference a week makes.

I yearned to know what was happening in Rome.

On the plane out of Washington, a young man sat next to me on the aisle side. He initiated our hour-long conversation by smiling broadly as he read the title of the book on my lap, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, by Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, and with a little laugh he asked "Are you a nun?"

My traveling companion turned out to be a Catholic church worker. We talked about the Catholic church's continuing credibility problems caused by real or perceived shortcomings in the institution's promises of accountability and transparency.

He filled me in on reports of what had happened over the preceding few days and of the possible connections with Pope Benedict XVI.

I had a copy of the pope's pastoral letter to the people of Ireland that I had tucked into my briefcase before leaving for Alabama, hoping that I would get a chance to study it more carefully during the week. I told my companion about the what I knew of Benedict's pastoral, situating it into what I knew of the problems in Ireland from the victims I had been in contact with there.

I have been increasingly involved in supporting survivors of childhood sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church since 2002. As I read the Irish pastoral letter, I looked for key words and phrases, to see which appeared and which were missing.

"Justice," for example was mentioned three or four times, but "collusion," as in between church authorities and government officials in Ireland, was not mentioned.

Vatican II was blamed, as were the priests and religious who had become "too worldly." Minimizing and rationalizing seem to be the preferred public relations spin for the Holy See's communications department.

What is not in this document is more important than what was included.

There was absolutely no connection made between what was unearthed in Ireland with what has happened in other countries. The pope made clear that this was an Irish problem that the bishops and priests of Ireland were expected to handle.

There was no acknowledgment of the epidemic or pandemic nature of the problem of sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic church nor was there any puzzlement expressed as to how or why this had happened in the United States, Canada, Australia or anywhere else as it had happened in Ireland.

Now those kinds of connections were being made widely in numerous media accounts. And even more questions were being raised. Questions we activists have long asked were being asked by the general public.

If the church has lost its way, why and how did that happen? What contributed to it? What structures supported and enabled it?

Why did bishops in the United States as in Ireland, Germany and elsewhere, make conscious, informed decisions to protect sexual predators? Why did they not only dismiss victims and their families who approached church authorities, but in at least some cases threatened, harassed, intimidated, shunned and -- in some jurisdictions in the United States -- even threatened them with lawsuits?

In the post 2002 era in the United States, the bishops have promised accountability and transparency, but what that covers and how has been left to the discretion of individual bishops. Why is this?

As a result there is no national church registry of clergy who have been removed from ministry or where they are located. Registries of convicted, known or credibly accused sexual predators are practically non-existent on diocesan Web sites. Why?

In state jurisdictions where bills have been introduced to expand on or remove statutes of limitation on the sexual abuse of children, bishops and state Catholic Conferences have been vicious in their lobbying efforts against proposed legislation. Why?

Our flight to Philadelphia was much too short for our conversation.

Why couldn't it have been a flight to Rome?

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