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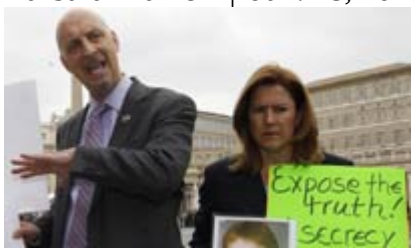
Outraged over police raid on church offices? Wait for what is revealed

Barbara Blaine | Jun. 28, 2010



Peter Isely and Barbara Blaine, both of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, speak to journalists in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 25. (CNS /Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters)

Commentary

The police raid last week on Catholic offices in Belgium [1] wasn't exactly received with open arms by church officials. All nine of the nation's bishops were detained for nine hours. Their cell phones and the phones of other diocesan personnel were held.

It was "not pleasant," one church staffer said. Another called it "not very agreeable." A third accused law enforcement of "paranoia" and a fourth claimed police showed "excessive zeal."

I was not sympathetic to their plight. Six years ago, I watched closely as another law enforcement raid of a diocesan headquarters took place in my home town of Toledo. The deception it uncovered was stunning. And the evidence it obtained was later used in a trial to convict a murderer.

In 2004, Fr. Gerald Robinson stood criminally charged with brutally stabbing and slaying Sr. Margaret Ann Pahl 24 years before. A devout Catholic police detective, who considered the Toledo diocesan chancellor a friend, was in charge of the investigation.

At that point, Robinson had been a priest in the Toledo diocese for 30 years. But when the detective asked the chancellor for Robinson's personnel file, he was given just three pages.

Puzzled, the detective, who is also an attorney, began researching canon law. He learned that each bishop is required to keep a secret archive, and to not ever disclose its existence. Armed with this knowledge, the police secured a search warrant.

On Sept. 15, 2004, according to *Toledo Blade* reporter David Yonke, "two detectives walked into the Catholic Center, ignoring the receptionist's pleas to sign in" and went straight to the Bishop Leonard Blair's office. They showed Blair the warrant, cited the secret archive, but were told by the bishop "it simply doesn't exist."

But when pressed, the chancellor eventually gave the detectives a file an inch and a half to two inches thick containing 148 documents about Robinson. "Many of those records were dated before the detective's request nine months earlier for all of the [cleric's records]," Yonke wrote. "Clearly, the diocese had not turned over all of its Robinson files."

The results of the case are mixed.

On one hand, a jury found Robinson guilty. He's now behind bars where he can't hurt anyone else, adult or child. (He's accused in a civil lawsuit of molesting girl as well.) On the other hand, however, despite claims that Pope Benedict speeded up the defrocking process, Robinson remains a priest today. And Robinson is appealing his conviction. Should he succeed on some technicality, he'll walk out of prison still a priest.

Another diocesan cleric, who prevented police from questioning Robinson as a suspect almost 30 years ago, has since passed away. Shockingly, a downtown street is named in his honor. The signs remain posted even today, rubbing more salt into the already-deep wounds of Sr. Pahl's family and local clergy sex abuse victims.

So I can't summon much compassion for the Belgian church employees who were inconvenienced for a few hours last week. It's theoretically possible, I suppose, that every one of them is completely innocent of committing or concealing child sex crimes (though just this year, hundreds of alleged victims of Belgian predator priests have stepped forward). It could be that Catholic bishops and chancery staff in Brussels handle, and have handled, pedophile priests radically differently than their Toledo counterparts. It's conceivable that Belgian law enforcement officials will uncover nothing questionable in the records they seized at the church headquarters and a bishop's home.

But based on what we've seen in Toledo, I sure wouldn't put any money on it.

[Barbara Blaine, a Toledo native, is the founder of a Chicago-based support group called SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. She can be reached at SNAPblaine@gmail.com.]

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