

On secular society, pope is right about one thing

Suzanne Morse | Dec. 23, 2010 NCR Today

Pope Benedict XVI's comments this week to the papal curia about the clergy sexual abuse crisis is sure to draw both condemnation and applause. [This AP article](#) [1] has statements from Barbara Blaine of SNAP criticizing the pope's analysis because he appears to be blaming the clergy sexual abuse crisis on secular society.

I certainly agree with Blaine's assessment that a culture of secrecy is, in large part, what led to the clergy sexual abuse crisis becoming so widespread and deeply-rooted a catastrophe for the Catholic Church. The sexual abuse of children is a Catholic church problem, one that reaches across ethnicities, cultures, and socio-economic status. The common denominator for the children (now, adults) who were abused was the church and the unfortunate fact that they crossed paths with an abusive priest who the institutional church should have removed but did not.

Despite the hierarchy's failings to address these problems within the church, I don't think that the pope's willingness to highlight the impact of the scourge of sexual abuse can be dismissed. The pope is not entirely wrong in saying that the church's crisis must be put in context of the sexual abuse of children in secular society. He is right when he says "The psychological destruction of children, in which human persons are reduced to articles of merchandise, is a terrifying sign of the times." Just this week, [Philip Greaves](#) [2] who wrote "The Pedophiles Guide to Love and Pleasure: A Child-Lover's Code of Conduct," was arrested. It is estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys face some sort of sexual abuse in childhood (some good information on sexual violence can be found at the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control](#) [3] and the [National Center for Victims of Crime](#) [4]).

The church, including the pope and the rest of the hierarchy, must recognize why it is that this crisis was ignored for so long, causing so much damage, and how it is that the church can authentically move forward from it. We will be entering the ninth year of the public crisis on Jan. 6 and it often feels as if many in the hierarchy continue to keep their head in the sand rather than truly acknowledge and face the magnitude of the damage. Authentic action is necessary? including ceasing efforts to block statute of limitations reform in states across the country and releasing the names of priests who have credible accusations against them.

But secular society also has to reckon with the level and amount of sexual abuse that children face every day, too. Children are sexually abused by people who are supposed to protect them or they are sold into degrading circumstances. Once again, this stretches across cultures, ethnicities, races, and religions. We see headlines every day and in every part of the world about children who were sexually abused. The consequences for our society is staggering ? survivors of abuse are often far more likely to experience depression and alcohol or drug abuse.

One of the only positives to arise out of the church's clergy sexual abuse crisis has been a better understanding of the effects of abuse, both individually and collectively. Even with that knowledge, however, passing child protection legislation that truly protects is notoriously difficult to do, particularly when the Church fights so vigorously against many of these initiatives. The Pope's willingness to spotlight abuse across the board is welcome if the Church is finally willing to act to protect its own flock and provide redress to those who were

victimized for so long by the church's inaction. If the pope and the bishops are willing to walk the walk, they will have a better hearing for when they talk the talk.

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