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What went wrong in Philly? Review board chair responds

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Ana Maria Catanzaro (photo taken from the USCCB Web site)

Stung by the harsh criticism of a grand jury report on sex abuse in the Philadelphia archdiocese and hurt by the failure of Cardinal Justin Rigali and his auxiliary bishops to be open and transparent with them, the sexual abuse review board of the archdiocese considered resigning, but didn't, the board's chairwoman has disclosed.

"If we had resigned, we concluded, the archdiocese would no longer have to listen to us. But there are other things to tell them," Ana Maria Catanzaro writes in a provocative article on the Web site of Commonweal magazine.

In the article posted May 12, Catanzaro defends the review board against the February grand jury's criticism that it had failed to protect children.

She says that archdiocesan officials held back pertinent information from the review board and she criticized the vagueness of definitions and terms and the lack of clarity in the process to review cases of sexual abuse of minors set up by U.S. bishops.

She also describes "heated discussions" between board members and canon and civil lawyers who wanted to narrow the scope of the review boards' purview.

She says that the review board members sought and were granted release from the confidential agreements they had signed so that they could publically discuss how the review board functions.

The article in Commonweal, she writes, "is my attempt to answer the question being asked by Catholics in Philadelphia and across the nation: What went wrong?

Catanzaro concludes the article with six recommendations for all review boards in the country on how and what kinds of allegations should be sent for review and how religious leaders can improve transparency and communication about clergy accused of sexual abuse.

Read the full article here: The Fog of Scandal [1]

Catanzaro writes how the board was "stunned" at the grand jury report from February. The grand jury criticized

the board for not recommending suspension of some dozens of priests. Catanzaro writes that the board had seen only 10 cases involving these priests.

The board was under the impression it was reviewing every abuse allegation by the archdiocese, she writes. It turns out they "had been advised only about allegations previously determined by archdiocesan officials to have involved the sexual abuse of a minor -- a determination we had been under the impression was ours to make."

"The board still doesn't know who made those decisions," she writes.

The board doesn't know if it got all the pertinent information from the archdiocese or if the grand jury received information from the archdiocese that the review board did not, Catanzaro writes.

The board requested a meeting with Cardinal Rigali and his auxiliary bishops. The bishops were apologetic about the media's treatment of the board, she writes, but would not make any public statements defending the review board for fear of being misinterpreted.

Rigali later released a press release announcing the suspension of 21 priests, a statement the board thought implied the board had reviewed the cases of those priests, which it had not, she writes.

Catanzaro delves into the problems in the charter and norms regarding the definition of "sexual abuse." Issues involving grooming as sexual abuse, the appropriate law for the age of a minor, and non-sexual inappropriate behavior appeared in about 25 percent of the cases the board reviewed. In some cases, Catanzaro writes, the board couldn't say that the accused's inappropriate actions violated the norms but it still considered the matter serious enough to recommend removal.

At times, the board fought with the three canon lawyers appointed by the archdiocese, with the canon lawyers insisting only canonical statutes apply.

"Shouldn't they also consider civil statutes, which may differ from canonical statutes, in making recommendations to their bishops? Further, is our job to determine whether it was a canonical or civil law that had been broken, or whether an alleged act of abuse took place?

Philadelphia bishops and canon lawyers said the review board's role was canonical, yet bishops and canon lawyers at the bishops' conference told Catanzaro that canon law is not the board's concern, that the board's purpose is to determine whether abuse occurred and then make a recommendation about the priest's suitability for ministry, she writes.

Catanzaro writes the board didn't see two-thirds of the cases because according to the archdiocese, most of those allegations involved inappropriate behaviors not related to sexual abuse of minors. Citing privacy laws, the archdiocese had not provided the psychological evaluations and other health records of priests in question.

The grand jury's standard for credibility of allegations relied on the Pennsylvania Crimes Code and the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law, which covers a wide range of inappropriate behavior. The review board's standard was from the charter and norms, which have a problematic definition of sexual abuse, she writes.

Another problem was legal advice from the archdiocese's civil attorneys. "Although concerns about liability can be legitimate, addressing the abuse scandal from a legalistic perspective focused on protecting the archdiocese from liability is simply wrong," Catanzaro writes.

The "carefully scripted statements" of Rigali and his auxiliary bishops caused people to wonder if the

archdiocese was hiding the truth, and caused others to think Rigali "simply allowed priests to be convicted by the media," creating fear in some priests "that they could be falsely accused and hung out to dry by the bishops," she writes.

The chief failing in Philadelphia, she writes, is clericalism.

She cites Jesuit Fr. George Wilson's description of clericalism: "Because I belong to the clergy I am automatically credible," "protecting our image is more important than confronting the situation," and "we don't have to be accountable to the laity. We are their shepherds."

"Over the past few months, that's how some Philadelphia Catholics and review-board members have perceived the attitude of Philadelphia's bishops," she writes.

"If Philadelphia's bishops had authentically followed their call to live the gospel, they would have acted differently," she writes. "Instead, they succumbed to a culture of clericalism."

If the bishops are not firmly and sincerely resolved to see the abuse end, she writes, "all the canon laws, review boards, civil laws, and grand-jury reports in the world won't solve this crisis. And the scandal will continue."

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