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Victims, justice and the new archbishop

Maureen Paul Turlish | Sep. 8, 2011

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput leads a religious freedom panel discussion Aug. 17 at World Youth Day in Madrid. (CNS)

COMMENTARY

[Statement by the author:

I am a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, an international community of women, writing in my own name from the depths of conscience. As a Sister of Notre Dame I take to heart that --

> "We are called to listen to the mourning of our fragmented world, of those impoverished by the growing divide between rich and poor and of the sexually exploited, trafficked, marginalised and abused women and children -- especially girls." (Calls, 2008 Chapter)

-- but the thoughts, opinions and recommendations having to do with the widespread sexual exploitation of children and the subsequent cover-up are very much my own.]

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, who headed the Denver archdiocese, was installed today as the 13th head of the Philadelphia archdiocese in a ceremony held at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul.

I welcome the archbishop to the city and church of my birth where I lived, studied and worked before entering the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, and where I taught in parish grade schools and chaired departments in two archdiocesan high schools.

I love my church and I am deeply committed to its mission in the world.

Having said that does not lessen the pain and shame of knowing that many individual priests have violated untold numbers of innocent children in the five counties that make up the Philadelphia archdiocese. Together with church authorities who protected these errant priests, all was done in the name of God.

The facts are documented right there, in excruciating detail, in the Philadelphia grand jury reports of 2005 and 2011.

Protocols said to have been put in place and followed by the archdiocese after 2005 were exposed as mere window dressing and PR spin like the archdiocese's cover story on Fr. Robert Brennan which Bishop Edward Cullen (an auxiliary bishop of the Philadelphia archdiocese before becoming bishop of Allentown in 1998) admitted in sworn deposition, "It's not the truth."

Many Catholics believed that church leadership was finally on the right track of accountability and transparency after the 2005 grand jury report only to find out in 2011 that their faith in the hierarchy was ill placed.

The church in Philadelphia never has been in more dire straits, and it has been in need of new leadership for a very long time.

Will Chaput be able to fill this leadership vacuum? I hope and pray that he will. However, the Philadelphia church has particular needs.

It needs a pastoral leader who believes in justice, the rights and protection of all; especially those who were so unable to protect themselves as children.

It needs a pastoral leader who is not afraid to recognize and admit to the existence of corrupted man-made structures which allowed the church's sexual abuse nightmare to continue unchecked for so long.

It needs a pastoral leader willing to work with committed groups of Catholic laity who are themselves deeply concerned over the systemic and endemic evil that has plagued the church -- despicable evils that, while committed by individuals, were enabled and covered up by complicit church hierarchs over many decades.

I welcome Chaput to the Philadelphia archdiocese but at the same time, I am deeply disturbed by a track record in Denver which is not all that one would wish for.

I am concerned about the use of Phase Line Strategies, a top public relations firm, which helped defeat long-needed legislation aimed at holding known sexual predators civilly accountable; predators who had already escaped criminal prosecution, irrespective of their race, color or religious affiliation.

I am concerned about the vicious opposition mounted against child abuse legislation supported by Colorado legislators including Gwyn Green who has said, "they [church leadership] read letters denouncing me from the pulpit ... and what they said was totally untrue."

Personal attacks on legislators by members of the hierarchy, local pastors or even by way of archdiocesan statements violate standards of both civility and propriety to say nothing of ethics and morality.

The bishops of the United States knew about the serious nature of sexual abuse in the early 1960s and they knew that priests were abusing children. A documented pattern of collusion, conspiracy and cover-up was the order of the day in dioceses both across the country as well as in Denver and Philadelphia.

Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua was quoted on a CNN "NewsNight" segment from Philadelphia on April 26, 2002, as he answered a reporter's question by saying, "We all are agreed that no priest guilty of even one act of sexual abuse of a minor will function in any ecclesial ministry or any capacity in our diocese." I remember because I was interviewed and quoted in that same "NewsNight".

One has only to read through the pages of both grand jury reports and the previously sealed depositions of top

archdiocesan leaders to realize the veracity of the grand jury's charges.

Victims of childhood sexual abuse have the right, like everyone else, to access justice in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. They should be able to exercise those rights. Their cases have been dragging on too long.

However, their right to due process and to the justice afforded in the criminal courts was suborned to the protection of rogue priests until statutes of limitation had expired.

Pennsylvania House Bills 832 and 878, proposed by Representatives Louise Bishop and Michael McGeehan, address the above failures.

Accountability for the crimes and sins of the present and future does not absolve anyone from the responsibility for the crimes and mortal sins of the past.

"Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God," (Mark 10:14).

If we don't help the poor, the disenfranchised, the innocent victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation who were unable to defend themselves, then we are indeed going to hell.

Without justice for all there is justice for none.

[Sr. Maureen Paul Turlish is a member of the National Survivor Advocates Coalition and the Justice4PAKids Coalition. She was invited by Rep. Michael McGeehan to speak to the bills introduced in Harrisburg on March 1, 2011. She also testified before the Senate and House Judiciary committees in support of Delaware's 2007 Child Victims' Law.]

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