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SNAP, the bishops and a lesson in ecclesiology

Thomas P. Doyle | Mar. 14, 2012 Examining the Crisis

Commentary

SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, came into existence in 1989, just five years after national attention was first focused on sexual molestation of minors by Catholic clergy. The founder, Barbara Blaine, is a survivor of abuse. The national director, David Clohessy, is also a survivor. SNAP came into existence because the institutional church, i.e., the bishops, could not and would not do anything to help the victims of the priests they were supposed to supervise.

Realizing that they would have to help themselves, Barbara and the original members started what has become the oldest and most effective advocacy and help group for the countless victims of clergy abuse throughout the United States and Europe as well.

Over the years since its existence, SNAP has done what the institutional church should have done: It offered understanding, support, solace and above all, hope for anyone who called upon it. SNAP is not a sophisticated organization with a well-oiled and financed bureaucracy. It has always been focused on providing support for victims, giving them the encouragement to begin to heal from the devastation of abuse and giving them hope, knowing they are not alone.

In 1993, Pope John Paul II issued his first public response to the clergy abuse issue in the form of a letter to the U.S. bishops. In this letter, he said the bishops have a responsibility to the "innocent victims." Unfortunately, that's all he said about victims, devoting most of the letter to a fumbled attempt to shift the blame to the secular media and U.S. culture.

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States. On the plane coming over, he spoke to the media and said, "The victims will need healing and help and assistance and reconciliation: This is a big pastoral engagement and I know that the bishops and the priests and all Catholic people in the United States will do whatever possible to help, to assist, to heal."

The pope was wrong on that one. The bishops as a group have certainly not helped the victims heal. They have said a lot of nice things, but their response has been hypocritical. While they feign sorrow and regret, make promises and lay on church floors at organized penance services, they are also waging a war against the survivors of the molestation and betrayed trust that they themselves have brought about. They continue to spend millions of the laypeople's dollars to try and bury any attempts at bringing civil legislation to protect victims into the 21st century and, most reprehensible, they continue to try to pound victims into the ground in the courts. The bottom line is that as with everything else, the response to the clergy abuse nightmare has to be their way or no way.

The latest and most convincing evidence of the bishops' collective failure following the present pope's admonitions is the organized attack on SNAP. This attack is being carried out by lawyers who represent two

priests accused of abuse, but it's not about justice for the priests. It's about destroying an organization that represents not only a source of profound embarrassment to the bishops but a serious threat to their continued duplicity. On one hand, the demand for SNAP's files is sending a horrific message to all victims of clergy abuse and to all who try to help and support them. The message is clear: Although individual bishops might be truly sympathetic, the bishops as a group simply don't "get it." Nothing has changed since 1985, when this sordid issue first came to widespread public awareness. They are only concerned for themselves, their image, their control over the laity and their money. The National Review Board had it right when they pinpointed this in their 2004 report.

But there is another side. The thinly veiled attack through the lawyers from Kansas City, Mo., and St. Louis is part of a strategy to discredit not only SNAP but all survivors of the sexual and spiritual abuse by the priests, religious and bishops. It shows that they fear SNAP and the survivors. Bill Donohue, who basically represents only himself, announced that SNAP is a "menace to the church." He also claimed in an editorial that "Jeff Anderson is an enemy of the church." Not one bishop has spoken out and said, "Bill, you're wrong." This is where we come to the ecclesiology part.

Ecclesiology is a fancy name for the theology of the church, the meaning of the church. This meaning had to be recalled by the assembled bishops at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) because it had been buried in the hierarchical trappings of the church as monarchy. The meaning resurrected by the council is simple yet profound: The church is the "People of God," which simply means that the boundaries don't stop with the bishops or with the clerical subculture. The council reminded Catholics that there were followers of the spirit and word of Christ before there was a hierarchy and a clerical world. Almost before the bleachers were removed from St. Peter's Basilica at the close of the last session in 1965, the forces intent on neutralizing the reborn understanding of the church were hard at work. These forces are more evident today than at any other time since the council, and they are led by bishops.

SNAP *is* the People of God. The laypeople and the priests, religious men and women and miniscule number of bishops who stand with victims of clergy abuse and give them hope and healing *are the church*. Even though they might not think so, the lawyers who help victims find justice and healing *are the church*. It's not true to say that "the church" does little to nothing to provide authentic help. The church has been *the* source of the help. It's not, however, been the part of the church that has the official mandate to extend pastoral care to those in need, namely, the hierarchy. But they are not "the church." They are only a very tiny part of it -- .00074 percent, to be more exact. Some would argue this and say that we all have a mandate and they are right, but the leadership in extending compassionate support should have come from the bishops. Even the pope expected it. But it has not come from the bishops or even from the papacy. It has come from people who, it appears, have a more realistic and theologically orthodox understanding of the meaning of "church" than those who hold the official positions in the institution.

So Bill Donohue (and anyone who agrees with him) is dead wrong, reading from a script that was never theologically sound and is certainly way out of date. The purpose of the "church" is not the care and feeding of the hierarchy. The most important people in the church, if one takes the lead from the example of Jesus, are not the ones with the fanciest and most colorful robes but the ones who are the most marginalized and rejected, and in this group, one must include the countless women and men who have become marginalized because of the physical and sexual abuse of the church's own ministers. They have been marginalized by the very ones who should lead the way in providing compassionate care, and they have been rejected by those who see them as a threat to their image, prestige and power.

The attacks on SNAP and the overall campaign to discredit and intimidate victims are a sure sign that an important part of the church has gone off the rails. It is a sign of a radically distorted ecclesiology. One way or the other, however, SNAP, its leadership, its members, those it helps and above all its spirit, will not be snuffed

out no matter how vehement the attacks from the hierarchy, their supporters and their cheerleaders. Why? Because SNAP is people. Not just any people, but a true expression of the People of God.

[Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle is a canon lawyer, addictions therapist and longtime supporter of justice and compassion for clergy sex abuse victims. He is a co-author of the first report ever issued to the U.S. bishops on clergy sex abuse, in 1986.]

Editor's Note:

Read *NCR*'s editorial: **SNAP subpoenas harm key ally for victims[1]**

For more *NCR* coverage of SNAP's depositions, see:

- **SNAP director may be forced to testify in abuse case [1]**, Dec. 29
- **SNAP leader: Testimony was 'fishing expedition'** [2], Jan. 3
- **SNAP receives second subpoena request for documents** [3], Jan. 5
- **SNAP, Catholic League leaders talk abuse scandal on radio show [4]**, Jan. 6
- **Court documents reveal motives for deposing SNAP [5]**, Jan. 23
- **Lawyers press for more SNAP documents, testimony [6]**, Feb. 24
- **SNAP leader's deposition made public [7]**, Feb. 24

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