

California abuse conference focuses on bishops' accountability

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 18, 2012



Washington state Judge Terrence Carrol, Kathleen McChesney and Ohio Judge Michael Merz present during a panel titled "Reflections on the Dallas Charter" at the Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002-2012 conference at Santa Clara University on May 11. (Joanne HoYoung Lee/Santa Clara University)

SANTA CLARA, Calif. -- Though a daylong summit on the clergy sexual abuse crisis in mid-May brought together a wide-range of leading experts on the topic -- from those who firmly defend the U.S. bishops' moves to address the issue to those who sometimes vehemently point to their weaknesses -- each seemed to find a key point of resonance.

From lawyers, sociologists, victims' advocates and a former employee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, there was a refrain: While there's no doubt that abuse reporting and education programs have vastly improved in the 10 years since widespread coverage of sexual abuse by priests rocked the U.S. Catholic church, the system set up by the country's bishops to address the problem is fundamentally flawed.

Ultimately, said nearly all of the experts at the May 11 event at Jesuit-run Santa Clara University here, the key flaw is in the fact that there is no internal accountability for bishops who do not report abuse or who do not follow the recommendations of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, passed by the bishops' conference in 2002.

In a keynote address, Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese, a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, put it starkly.

"We still do not have a system for bringing bishops to account," he said. "It is a disgrace that only one bishop (Cardinal [Bernard] Law of Boston) resigned because of his failure to deal with the sexual abuse crisis. The church would be in a much better place today if 30 or more bishops had stood up, acknowledged their mistakes, taken full responsibility, apologized and resigned.

"A shepherd is supposed to lay down his life for his sheep," Reese continued. "These men were unwilling to lay down their croziers for the good of the church."

Although not stated as bluntly, Reese's point was echoed many times at the conference, which was titled "Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002-2012." In four separate panels and two keynote addresses, some 140 attendees representing those who work closest on the topic heard similar viewpoints.

Among the presenters at the conference were Kathleen McChesney, the first director of the U.S. bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection; Ohio Judge Michael Merz, a former member and chair of the bishops' National Review Board; Dominican Fr. Tom Doyle, a canon lawyer known for authoring one of the first reports on the subject; and Barbara Blaine, founder and president of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP).

On their panel, titled "Reflections on the Dallas Charter," McChesney and Merz outlined what they saw as the successes of the 2002 charter and the National Review Board set up to oversee the bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection.

While McChesney, who has also served as an executive assistant director at the FBI, said there were both positive and negative aspects to the charter, she highlighted several key points she said were still missing in its implementation, among them:

- There is no comprehensive list of clergy known to have abused children or of the actions taken against them;
- Likewise, the lack of a "comprehensive database" of priests "credibly accused" of abuse;
- There is "no assurance of diocesan compliance" with the charter.

McChesney said bluntly: "There is still no accountability for bishops."

Merz, who served as a member and then chair of the bishops' National Review Board during 2004 to 2009, recounted that in February 2004, the board made 24 recommendations to committees at the conference for how to better respond to allegations of abuse. In response, the judge said, the board heard back from only one committee, which responded negatively to the board's advice.

A separate panel on clergy formation, screening and treatment also saw reference to the bishops' power in determining when priests are able to serve in ministry.

Following his presentation on clergy treatment, Jesuit Fr. Gerard McGlone, executive director of the St. John Vianney Center, a treatment facility in Downingtown, Pa., that works with clergy accused or suspected of abuse, was asked: "What would you do if a bishop were to return to ministry a priest you recommended be removed?"

"Because the role of psychology and the role of treatment centers in the church is pretty clear, we give our recommendations. From the beginning to the end, we recommend. We do not decide," McGlone responded. "Those reports are fairly clear and that's all we do is recommend."

Blaine also focused on bishop accountability, saying the "so-called reforms" of church officials were "not significant." She said the "most significant events of the last decade" were local grand juries investigating the church's role in clergy abuse.

Handing out a piece of paper that identified 11 such investigations -- including those in Boston, Philadelphia and Maine -- Blaine said, "The findings in every one of them were almost identical: Church officials don't report abuse to police."

A panel discussion on how church culture affects the ongoing crisis included Doyle; sociologist Anson Shupe of Indiana University/Purdue University; and psychologist and former priest A.W. Richard Sipe, known for his work studying the mental health problems of priests.

Tackling 14 points on how he believes "cultural considerations" within the church have worsened its response to abuse, Sipe said, "Only an honest examination and reformation of that culture will address adequately the problem of clerical malfeasance about which sex is central."

In his keynote, Reese also criticized what he called a "culture of fear and dependency" in the church.

Pointing out that diocesan priests are "totally dependent on the goodwill of their bishop" in getting desired assignments and promotions, Reese said, "Speaking truth to power is not welcomed in the Catholic church."

"In this corporate culture, few are going to tell the bishop no," he continued, referring to the ongoing trial in Philadelphia of Msgr. William Lynn, a former secretary of clergy in that archdiocese who is the first diocesan administrator to be criminally charged for shuffling around priests suspected of abuse rather than reporting them to police.

Also presenting a keynote address at the gathering was Karen Terry, interim dean of research at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, which has published two separate reports on the crisis.

The Santa Clara University conference follows publication of many of the speakers' viewpoints on the scandal in a new book, *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002-2012*.

Published in October 2011, the book also includes chapters written by retired Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson; psychologist Monica Applewhite, who has worked with more than 150 U.S. religious institutes on sexual abuse prevention; and Washington state Judge Terrence Carroll, who has served as the chair of the Seattle archdiocese's clergy abuse review board.

Two of the presenters at the May 11 conference openly wondered what effect, if any, such gatherings could have in strengthening the church's response to abuse.

In separate, short interviews during a mid-conference break, Blaine and Reese both referred to what Reese called the "elephant in the room."

While saying the U.S. church "should be lauded" for putting into place programs to report and educate about abuse, Reese also said, "We still have the problem that the highest level of leadership is not accountable."

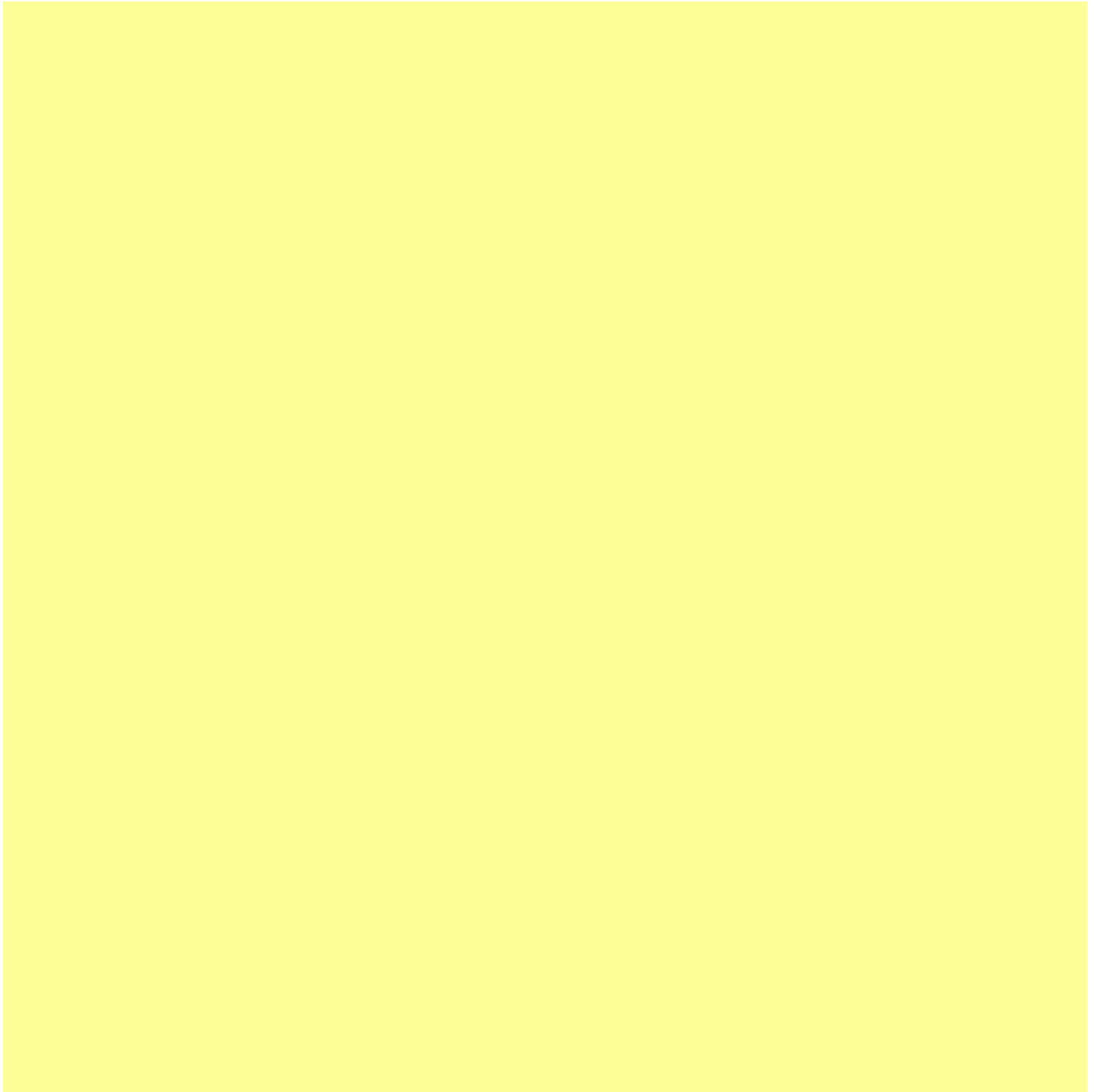
Blaine said it was "refreshing" to hear such "frank" talk about the problems facing the church on the issue, but

added, "I'm not sure that anyone in this room is in a position to actually hold any authority to bring about the changes that many recognize and discuss here. That is not acknowledged -- that authority isn't here, it's not in this room."

Referring to the bishops, she continued: "There's no one here to make them do anything. And there isn't even ? any ability within the church for bishops to be held accountable."

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[Click here for more on Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese's talk at the conference.](#) [1]



Speakers asked: 'Where is there hope?'

At the end of the day May 11, all 14 speakers and panelists for the conference on clergy sex abuse at Santa Clara University came to the stage.

After a full day of discussing a crisis that seems to plumb the depths of sadness, one of the conference's co-hosts had one last question for them.

Thomas Plante, a psychologist known also for his work assisting in clergy screening programs, asked a two-part question for each to answer, one at a time: "Where do we go from here? And where is there hope?"

Not something to be answered easily.

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese responded on a personal level. Saying that "nothing replaces sitting down and listening to those who have been victimized," he said, "That's got to be part of who we are as church.

"It's got to be a requirement for every seminarian, for every priest, for every bishop -- all the way up," Reese continued. "Sitting down and listening and spending time. I don't think we're going to get out of this and make real progress until we see real faces, real people, and shed tears with those people."

Barbara Blaine, the founder and president of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, also replied in that vein.

Reiterating a point from her presentation earlier in the day, she encouraged those present to be unafraid to ask people they know if abuse had scarred their families or communities.

"Encourage them to speak up, regardless of how painful it is," she said.

Stating that abuse victims are sometimes seen as harming the church, she also asked those present to remember: "We are not your enemies."

Jesuit Fr. Gerard McGlone, head of the St. John Vianney Center, asked his own question in reply. He said he recognized that "it's very difficult to stay in the moment and learn what the moment calls us into" and his hope is that "we as bishops, we as priests, we as laypeople stop pointing the finger and stand together."

"Why not dream of forgiveness that demands a lot of work and accountability and justice?" McGlone asked. "Why not dream of hope?"

-- *Joshua J. McElwee*

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