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SNAP fundraiser focuses on healing wound of child sex abuse

by Ben Feuerherd

New York — Victims of clergy sex abuse are tired of the meager steps taken by the church to prevent these crimes. These victims want the Vatican to acknowledge them and want their suggestions taken into account. Above all, they want bishops and priests who do not report these crimes to be held accountable. These were among the issues raised Thursday at a Manhattan fundraiser for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP.

"Bishop after bishop will say to me, 'The media have caused this problem,' " said retired Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton at the event. "They are the ones the bishops blame on a regular basis, as well as blaming the victims themselves. They want to keep it all quiet."

Three Catholic organizations sponsored the event -- Call To Action - Metropolitan New York; Voice of the Faithful, New York; and Dignity/NY -- and was endorsed by the Center for Constitutional Rights. About 85 people attended.

For Gumbleton and the other speakers at the fundraiser, the sex abuse crisis is an institutional problem. Documentary filmmaker Alex Gibney showed a clip from his recent HBO documentary, "Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God," to prove this point. The clip showed Laurie Goodstein of *The New York Times* speaking about her investigation of clergy sex abuse at a church-run school for the deaf in Wisconsin. The documentary says documents Goodstein unearthed implicated Pope Benedict XVI in an attempt to keep the abuse quiet.

Barbara Blaine, founder and president of SNAP, further expounded on sex abuse in her presentation. SNAP was founded as an organization where victims of clergy sex abuse can share their stories and "claim power by preventing this," she said.

Blaine said an institutional cover-up was evident from her earliest days with SNAP. She pointed to a 2011 grand jury report that found 37 priests accused of sexual misconduct were allowed to continue working in the Philadelphia archdiocese, sometimes a year after the first accusations had been made. No one outside the chancery were told of the accusations.

For Jordan Walsh, a graduate of the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University, the answer when dealing with sex abuse lies in civil law.

"Statute of limitations reform is the most important thing we can do to bring justice," Walsh said. In a state like New York, she said, a child sex abuse victim has five years after his or her 18th birthday to file a claim, yet in many cases, because of feelings like shame, guilt and fear, it takes many years for someone to come forward and be honest about sexual abuse.

Child rights activists and victims' groups in New York are promoting the Child Victims Act, which would extend the time a victim has to lodge a sexual abuse complaint. Chief among the opponents of the act is New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who said the act "is terribly unjust. It singles [out] the church and it would be, and I use the word purposefully, devastating for the life of the church."

Gumbleton offered his thoughts on how to heal this "wound of abuse" in his presentation.

"We need to acknowledge deep desolation and the wound in the church's heart caused not only by the crisis of abuse but by the way in which it is addressed," he said, quoting from a recent *America* magazine article. "The 'clerical culture' where priests protect one another must end. Bishops throughout the world have to be held accountable."

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Feelings among participants at the event were mixed on whether the election of Pope Francis will help heal this wound.

Blaine said she is hopeful but also is "disappointed in what's come to light so far." The bishop's conference of Argentina, of which Pope Francis was the president of until November 2011, failed to meet a May 2012 deadline for submitting a formal set of policies on fighting child abuse.

The bishops say they were waiting for a February 2012 summit on the sexual abuse crisis to submit their final guidelines. However, Blaine said there is "no reason the policy couldn't have been created and later amended."

Blaine also shared suggestions she has for the new pope:

- "Make a proclamation that any bishop found transferring or failing to report an abusive priest will be fired."
- "Bishops should be expected to report sex crimes to the police."
- "Post names of the credibly accused."
- "Reward whistleblowers and thank them."

Gumbleton said he believes Francis' actions so far are encouraging. The bishop stressed dialogue as a way to confront this issue, and said Francis' decision to wash the feet of two women, including a Muslim, on Holy Thursday is a good sign.

However, Gumbleton said the pope must show willingness to communicate with concrete actions.

"The Synod of Bishops should be re-established so bishops can engage in open discussion," he said. Furthermore, Gumbleton said he hopes the pope engages and listens to the Catholics he meets from other countries as he travels the world. "If he continues to function the way he seems to have functioned ... there is a chance to begin genuine dialogue."

[Ben Feuerherd is a freelance writer based in New York City.]

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