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Panel of advocates discuss Catholic church's 'mortal sins'

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Rumors that the Roman Catholic church's clergy sex abuse crisis is a problem of the past have been greatly exaggerated.

"The bishops' public relations machine has persuaded the people that it is a problem that *was*, not that is," Jeff Anderson says, "and that is a living lie. There have been superficial changes, but not fundamental changes."

Anderson, one of the most well-known lawyers to bring a lawsuit against the Roman Catholic church, was part of a panel to promote the publication of *Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime, and the Era of Catholic Scandal*, a new book by journalist Michael D'Antonio.

The event took place April 23 in New York City's Bleecker Street Theatre, one week before new revelations that, just across the Hudson River, Newark's Archbishop John J. Myers allowed a priest who admitted to groping a 14-year-old boy to attend youth retreats, travel with a youth group on a pilgrimage to Canada and hear the confessions of minors.

In addition to Anderson, the panel, moderated by D'Antonio, included some of the biggest names in advocacy against child sexual abuse, all of whom figure prominently in *Mortal Sins*: canon lawyer Fr. Thomas Doyle, psychotherapist Richard Sipe, former priest Patrick Wall, and Barbara Blaine, founder and president of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

Blaine, whom Anderson credits with "starting the child civil rights movement in America," echoed the warning that bishops continue to reassign priest sex offenders to ministerial roles.

"Children are at risk today," Blaine said, recounting a story from early April in which an accused priest in

Chicago was quietly transferred to chaplaincy work in a hospital, where he could have had contact with minors.

Much of the conversation among the five panelists focused on why these abuses continue to persist given that in the past decade, the institution has suffered severely negative press, a mass exodus of followers, and more than \$3 billion in settlements worldwide.

D'Antonio traces the root of the problem to the church's unusual relationship to spiritual and political power, which he said began in 1870, when the pope was given a new form of authority called infallibility. Then, 60 years later, the Vatican's civil status was defined in a concordat signed by then-Prime Minister Benito Mussolini.

"Catholicism became the only religion in the world with the status of a country, ruled by a churchman who was also a monarch," D'Antonio explains in *Mortal Sins*.

For Doyle, it's the church's monarchical structure that has made the global sex abuse cover-up possible. "In the office of pope, there is the power to demand complete obedience and to require secrecy in order to preserve that power."

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Anderson said the obedience requirement has resulted in the "absolute exclusion of critical thinking" among the clergy, who are threatened with "the loss of pay, power and pension" if they refuse to obey.

Doyle himself suffered precisely these kinds of losses when he broke ranks with the hierarchy's code of silence decades ago.

In his post in the office of the papal nuncio to the United States, Doyle learned of a priest that had raped "at least 100, maybe 500" children. He blew the whistle but believed in the end, the church leaders would do the right thing.

In time, though, Doyle said he realized he was part of a system more interested in "protecting its power, prestige and wealth."

"I have a deep respect for church as the body of Christ, but no respect left for the institution, the pope or the bishops," Doyle said. "There is corruption from the top down."

Doyle describes himself as "terminally cynical" but insists he didn't start out that way. When he was younger, he said he "acted like a humble servant of the church, but I was an ambitious cleric, loyal to the institution.

"What changed me was meeting the victims of sex abuse and their mothers and fathers," Doyle told the panel audience.

Like Doyle, Sipe trusted the institutional church would eventually fix this crisis, and he, too, said the cover-ups "reach the highest corridors of the Vatican."

While panelists agreed celibacy does not cause pedophilia, Sipe argued that mandatory celibacy creates an environment conducive to "institutional blackmail."

"Clerics know about the sex lives of other clerics," Sipe said, "and as a result, they have a certain claim on each other." In some cases, if a bishop tried to force a priest into treatment, the priest would turn around and threaten to make public the bishop's sexual secrets.

Although he has been married for years, at age 13, Sipe entered a Catholic monastery. He said his training helped him understand the courage of those who have been abused.

"The spirituality of monasticism is a spirituality of radical honesty," Sipe told the audience. "Victims have to be radically honest about what happened to them and fight to get a response."

Of course, the victimization often is not limited to those who were abused. Entire parish communities are often traumatized when a priest is accused of sexual misconduct. For years, Wall, a former priest and Benedictine monk, acted as a "fixer" assigned to helping parishes and schools heal after the removal of abusive priests.

Now married with children, Wall has spent years studying the history of sex abuse in the Roman Catholic church, a history the hierarchy has still failed to acknowledge. He said allegations of sex abuse can be seen in church records as early as the 12th century.

"The church itself hasn't changed. The clerics I worked with haven't changed," Wall said. He said he left the priesthood when he realized "the only way that abuse survivors would get the help and healing they needed was outside of the church hierarchy."

With such a bleak past, audience members wondered if there was any chance for real change in this crisis.

"We will not see radical change under this pope or any other pope unless there is a change in the system that says the pope and cardinals are above everyone because God made them that way," Doyle said. "The men at the top need to be fired."

"We must demand and require legally and culturally that the Vatican disgorge itself of its secrets and that they obey civil laws," he said.

Doyle agrees that no institution has put more policies and procedures in place regarding sex abuse than the Roman Catholic church. He said the sad part is that force had to be used to get the bishops to respond appropriately and adequately in many cases.

"Everything has been a fight to the mat," he said.

Blaine agreed, saying typically whenever church leaders agree to act to protect children, they do it "begrudgingly, belatedly and after a lot of pressure."

Because advocates like Anderson, Doyle, Sipe and Blaine have been in the mainstream media for decades, little of what they said at the discussion would have been new to anyone follows the sex abuse crisis closely.

But the beauty of D'Antonio's book is the way in which he gathers the countless stories reported in newspapers or heard on talk shows over the years and presents them in a style that is as engaging as a legal thriller. And he manages to do this with a tone consistently compassionate and respectful.

Mortal Sins succeeds in giving a survey of decades of painful church history and, perhaps more importantly, in putting a human face on the individuals who have been the subject of news reports since

the 1980s.

For all of the dark truths he encountered in his years of research, D'Antonio was surprisingly the most optimistic of the panelists, suggesting that though his book is about a tragedy, "it is a story with some hope." He even believes that a Catholic Spring may be afoot.

"The deferential element that the hierarchy used to enjoy is eroding. The playing field is leveling because a bunch of men and women got pushed to the wall and stood up to a mammoth institution," D'Antonio told the audience. "And all they had going for them was the truth."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

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