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The long, sad record

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2014

In January, Cardinal Francis George prepared Chicago Catholics for a release of documents detailing the archdiocese's mishandling of clergy accused of sexually abusing minors. An archdiocesan statement described the documents as "upsetting" and "painful to read." The decisions church officials made decades ago "are now difficult to justify" but were based on "the prevailing knowledge at the time," it said.

George's letter specifically addressed the case Daniel McCormack, a priest that the cardinal would eventually defrock, but whom he allowed to stay in ministry -- against the advice of his review board -- for months after allegations against McCormack surfaced. George only removed him after McCormack's second arrest in 2006.

"The response, in retrospect, was not always adequate to all the facts, but a mistake is not a cover up," George wrote.

2013

Last fall, as details emerged about how the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese mishandled cases of clergy sexually abusing of minors, Archbishop John Nienstedt acknowledged mistakes: "Our policies and procedures may not have been uniformly followed."

In December, he apologized to Catholics, saying that when he was named archbishop seven years ago, he had been told that clergy sex abuse was no longer an issue. "Unfortunately, I believed that and so my biggest apology today ... is to say I overlooked this. I should have investigated it more than I did."

2009

Federal prosecutors announced they would investigate how the Los Angeles archdiocese had handled cases of clergy sexually abusing minors. Cardinal Roger Mahony reacted: "We have said repeatedly that ... our understanding of this problem and the way it's dealt with today evolved, and that in those years ago, decades ago, people didn't realize how serious this was, and so, rather than pulling people out of ministry directly and fully, they were moved."

2001

In July, just as the case of serial child molester Boston priest John Geoghan was becoming public, Cardinal Bernard Law wrote in his archdiocesan newspaper about a policy he had instituted in 1993 to ensure that no priest who had abused a child was assigned to a job that would put children at risk. He acknowledged that the policy had not worked perfectly.

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"I only wish that that the knowledge we have today had been available to us earlier." The church, he wrote, "has been on a learning curve. We have learned, and we will continue to learn." Eighteen months later, Law would resign as archbishop of Boston.

1995

As a score of lawsuits were filed in several states against Catholic dioceses for the mishandling of clergy accused of sexually abusing minors, Bishop John Kinney of Bismarck, N.D., appointed the year before to lead an ad hoc committee on clergy sex abuse, tried to explain the bishops' position: "There's a difference between a cover-up and a lack of knowledge. We did not as a body of bishops have the knowledge we do now."

1985

In executive session during its June meeting, the U.S. bishops' conference received a 92-page report, "The Problem of Sexual Molestation by Roman Catholic Clergy: Meeting the Problem in a Comprehensive and Responsible Manner." It covered the civil, canonical and psychological aspects of priest sexual involvement with children. It was prepared by Fr. Michael Peterson, then director of St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Md.; Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, then a canonist for the papal nuncio in Washington; and F. Ray Mouton, a civil attorney hired by the Lafayette, La., diocese to represent a pedophilia priest.

Among its findings: that while help can be provided for abusive priests, there is "no hope" for a permanent "cure" and that a bishop "should suspend immediately" any priest accused of sexual abuse when "the allegation has any possible merit or truth." (Read more about the report at NCRonline.org/node/68446.) The report was shelved.

1963

After Fr. Gerald Fitzgerald, founder of the Servants of the Paraclete, a U.S. order established in 1947 to deal with problem priests, met Pope Paul VI, he wrote the pontiff: "Personally I am not sanguine of the return of priests to active duty who have been addicted to abnormal practices, especially sins with the young."

For years, Fitzgerald had been writing to U.S. and Vatican officials, warning them of returning priest abusers to ministry. (Read more.)

1962

The Vatican's Congregation of the Holy Office asked Fitzgerald's opinion about priests who have "fallen into repeated sins ... and most especially the abuse of children." His five-page response said, "Such unfortunate priests should be given the alternative of a retired life within the protection of monastery walls or complete laicization."

1957

Bishop Matthew F. Brady of Manchester, N.H., wrote Fitzgerald seeking a recommendation for "a problem priest" caught repeatedly in "escapades" with young girls. Fitzgerald replied that the Paracletes had "adopted a definite policy not to recommend to bishops men of this character. ... We feel that the protection of our glorious priesthood will demand, in time, the establishment of a uniform code of discipline and of penalties."

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