

SNAP

Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests and Other Clergy

October 20, 2005

Dear Cardinal Rigali:

According to Catholic canon law, tradition, culture and practice, a bishop is a shepherd, entrusted with the care of his flock, especially the vulnerable. You, of course, are the bishop of Philadelphia and it is quite clear from the recent grand jury report that your flock has been savaged by a group of wolves. The report makes it clear that the wolves - cardinals, archbishops, bishops, monsignors and priests - conspired to allow these attacks to continue and then hid the predators, often moving them and giving them a fresh start, almost never contacting law enforcement or warning unsuspecting parishioners.

Because you are the shepherd, you have a chance, indeed an obligation, to heal the wounded and safeguard the vulnerable.

The question now is: what will you do now? Will you continue to respond to this unprecedented crisis with words? Or will you take decisive action to spare others the horrific pain that we've endured, and decisive action to allow victims to further recover and seek justice?

Toward those ends - the recovery of those in pain and the protection of those at risk - we urge you to take two steps.

First, we urge you to publicly endorse and lobby for a one-year civil "window" that would enable sex crimes victims to bring lawsuits and use the justice system to protect children and expose child molesters, and move toward recovery and healing. We expect such legislation to be introduced in Harrisburg soon.

This "window" is our top priority. It is one of several legislative reforms recommended by the grand jury report. It is also, in our view, the single most effective legislative reform that will prevent future abuse.

Right now, molesters and their employers have a strong incentive to lie, to cover up, to intimidate victims, to threaten witnesses, and to destroy evidence. Because of Pennsylvania's arbitrary and archaic statute of limitations, sex offenders and their enablers are allowed to "run out the clock," invoke this legal technicality, escape detection, and continue to harm youngsters. This incentive must be removed.

California lawmakers enacted such a reform in 2002. It has led to the removal of many abusive teachers, coaches and ministers. It led to some 800 civil cases against clergy, many of which have been settled with little negative fall out. As a result of this courageous reform, we believe that California is now the safest state for children in the USA.

In two other states - Ohio and New York - one legislative chamber has passed such a provision. Several other legislatures are considering similar bills right now. The

"window" is a workable, proven tool we can use to expose sex offenders, warn families about them and safeguard children from them.

You can follow the lead of several of your brother bishops, and fight this sorely-needed reform tooth and nail. You can sit idly by while abuse victims work tirelessly for its passage. Or you can forge a new path, show that indeed you have learned from this crisis, and throw your clout behind this effective way to give rape and sodomy victims access to our time-tested justice system. We urge you to join us in backing this measure.

Second, we urge you to publicly fire church employees, including your second-in-command, who have covered up clergy sex crimes against children.

Simply put, church employees who allowed clerics to prey on innocent children must be disciplined. To ignore their complicity, to simply "move forward" with no accountability is not only unjust. It is also reckless. When adults knowingly, callously put children in harm's way, they must face consequences, or we risk encouraging them to do likewise in the future.

But no one on your payroll has been removed from any position of authority, much less suspended for even one day, because of their mismanagement or insensitivity or inexcusable behavior.

By allowing the abuse, children were grievously harmed, their families were torn apart and parishes were divided over this issue. Many victims have struggled their whole lives with suicide, drugs, alcohol, depression, failed marriages and aborted careers. Can you ignore these crimes, and the church workers who enabled them to happen?

Some in our support group, SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, are very distraught over the fact that no consequences have been meted out to any church workers - lay or clerics - who didn't report or worked to keep hidden known or suspected sex crimes against kids, despite a grand jury's recent conclusions about a "concerted cover up" by the church hierarchy.

They are not alone. Survey after survey show that a surprisingly high percentages of Catholics are also distraught, both at the crimes of pedophile priests and at the complicity and on-going secrecy and inaction of church officials.

Common sense, justice and safety all demand that you take concrete actions against such complicit employees. This isn't vengeful, it is deterrence. It isn't about punishment, it is about prevention. All your hollow-sounding pledges to "do better," "put children first," "learn from mistakes" will continue to ring hollow until you show by your deed that you mean business. You can talk "zero tolerance" all day long. But until you act on "zero tolerance," few will believe or should believe that you are sincere.

Keep in mind that most psychologists tell us that pedophiles can't be cured, that no consequences will prevent them from acting on their compulsive urges. However, other church employees CAN be influenced by consequences. If you fire those who ignored or enabled the molestation of children, others on the archdiocesan payroll will think twice before turning a blind eye to suspicions of abuse in the future. That is what you claim you want. But your actions do not match your words.

In particular, we want you to publicly fire Auxiliary Bishop Joseph R. Cistone. According to the Inquirer, the grand jury found that Cistone was "complicit in the 1996 silencing of Sister Joan Scary, who was trying to alert parishioners" about an abusive priest, and in 2002, took no action after learning that another molester had been teaching in two suburban school districts.

Yet you promoted Cistone in July 2004, two years into the Philadelphia grand jury's investigation of the archdiocese.

How can hurting abuse victims and betrayed Catholic parishioners believe that long-standing patterns of secrecy and insensitivity will change when the personnel at the top of the archdiocesan hierarchy do not change?

We urge you to give our suggestions serious consideration. We look forward to hearing from you.

David Clohessy of St. Louis, SNAP National Director 314 566 9790
Pat Clancy of Philadelphia, SNAP Philadelphia Support Leader 215 850 2527
Marie Whitehead of Philadelphia, SNAP Philadelphia Director 215 200 1043