

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO PROVINCIAL POLICY
AND A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO
INSTANCES OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF MINORS
AT ST. ANTHONY'S SEMINARY

THE RELIGIOUS FRATERNITY

The sexual abuse of minors is an egregious violation of personal integrity which results in the breaking of society's most basic bonds of human loyalty and trust. It is an invasion of both the personal and familial life of the victim. I cannot express in words the sorrow that all of us feel for the victims and families. We are deeply compassionate.

When this abuse is perpetrated by a priest or religious, the offensiveness is compounded by the high regard, faith and power given to those in positions of pastoral example and leadership in the Catholic Christian community.

Knowledge of the action provokes confusion about faith, anger at the personal violation, and sows distrust in all directions. In many instances it creates a "solidarity in victimhood" between the minor, his family, and the community to which they belong. Often the violation is so fundamental that it is met with denial and incomprehension. Because defensiveness is frequently a factor, those once victimized can become twice victimized--and the cycle of violence continues. I am truly sorry if, in some ways, we have contributed to this cycle.

Vowed to the Gospel life, we friars unreservedly believe that sexual abuse cannot be tolerated in any form. Above all, we abhor the sexual abuse of children who are essentially powerless and voiceless. As a religious fraternity we must take decisive, unequivocal, effective measures to speak for those who have no voice, to tend the wounds of those in the Body of Christ who have been violated, and to begin to restore the basic trust and fidelity which have marked the close relationship between the friars and the community which received them in the bonds of friendship.

We friars must also share the pain of facing the truth about ourselves and our brothers. We publicly and firmly want to take personal and corporate responsibility for systemic changes to heal the past, address the present and plan the future. As "penitents from Assisi" and vowed peacemakers within the Church and society, we will, with your help, "turn our face like flint" to the urgent task at hand. Within our Gospel way of life we believe that our pastoral response should be dictated by the integrity of the Gospel and our covenant with you, the People of God. With your help and partnership, we seek "truth with a pastoral face."

THE PRESENTING ISSUES

In March of 1989 Paul and Bernard Smith filed charges of sexual abuse against Philip Mark Wolfe, a Franciscan priest and teacher at St. Anthony's Seminary from September 1981 to June 1984. The molestations occurred between 1983 and 1987 but, because of the statute of limitations, only the charges of Bernard Smith were dealt with.

In September of 1989 Philip Wolfe pleaded "no contest" to one count of oral copulation with a person under eighteen and was given a six month's jail sentence followed by six months in a treatment center.

Recently, in May of this year, the Smith family informed the Provincial Minister that Bernard, a member of the Santa Barbara Boys' Choir, had been inappropriately, sexually touched by Fr. Robert Van Handel, founder of the choir and teacher at St. Anthony's Seminary from May 1975 to its closure in June 1987.

In October of this year a public letter was sent to all participants in the Boys' Choir. On October 28, during a meeting at St. Anthony's Seminary, new information surfaced, indicating that Fr. Robert's sexual abuse of minors extended into the seminary itself. Since that time, several other victims--some both members of the Boys' Choir and seminarians--

have come forward. In addition, past allegations, dating back many years, have come to light, along with rumors.

THE EVOLUTION OF PROVINCE POLICIES

The first Province policy concerning issues of sexual misconduct was developed by the Franciscans in 1988. Subsequent revisions in this policy have been prompted by the persistence and honest challenging by the Smith family; and we are indebted to them.

After meeting with the Smiths in January 1990, in the wake of the dreadful first victimization, the definitorium worked on achievable goals actively and with the strongest pastoral responsibility. Many of these goals have been presented by the Smiths themselves. Let me give a few examples:

For myself, I have shared the fruit of my own experience the past two years with Region VI of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, insisted on the importance of major policy statements and reviews at that level, and spoken on the importance of correct action and attention to victims with the Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry of the National Conference of Bishops, of which I was a member for three years. Our experience has had a major effect on the English Speaking Conference of the Order of Friars Minor covering Malta, England, Canada and the United States. Our own experience in Santa Barbara, then, has had a ripple effect for the good far beyond the boundaries of the friars and Santa Barbara. The response on all of these levels has been tremendous.

Locally, this process of growth these past two years involved the entire Franciscan fraternity. Admissions' procedures were scrutinized and modified; professionals in the fields of psycho-sexual development and sexual deviancy conducted sessions for both those in formation and for the fraternity at large. After an interim policy, a clear and precise statement on sexual misconduct was adopted by the Province in January 1992. Our policy has been composed with the best psychiatric, pastoral and legal advice possible.

We see our policy and programs as developmental because, for example, the policy now in place was designed to deal with current rather than historical issues of misconduct. The most recent knowledge of past instances of abuse opens up a new chapter in our own painful growth. In all of this, we have committed ourselves to working in a comprehensive way.

COMPREHENSIVE PROVINCE POLICIES

1. Formation Programs

Aspirants to our way of life come to us by way of our Vocations' Directors. After thorough initial interviews and tentative approval, the candidates then undergo a lengthy process of discernment which includes independent and objective professional evaluation, using such instruments the Object Relations Test, the Rocharch, hostility quotients and word association testing as well as extensive interviews covering family history, work experience, socialization patterns, psycho-sexual development and so on.

The application process is concluded with a final interview with the candidate and the independent Admissions to Formation Committee consisting of five friars. Having reviewed all the testing and other documents and consulting with the vocation directors, the Admissions Committee deliberates privately and prepares its own recommendation for each applicant. This is presented to the Provincial for final approval or rejection.

Although this is a thorough process, in the light of recent events the entire structure will be reevaluated and, if necessary, augmented through the recommendations of an independent review board.

2. Ongoing Education

In our formation program which lasts from six to nine years, we have in place extensive programs of continuing education in the areas of sexual maturation, pastoral responsibility and sexual deviancy. After final vows and admission to pastoral responsibilities as a priest or laic friar, the programs of education continue, sometimes through the local diocese and more often through the Province itself. All of these programs will likewise be reviewed by an independent board. If necessary, these also will be augmented.

3. Personnel Review

As a corporate entity the Province does not operate any educational establishments involving minors. Parish programs are regulated by the policies of each diocese in which we work. It is, however, incumbent upon us to institute an independent review of all friars involved in ministry to minors. Likewise we will review all past personnel decisions and request recommendations from the independent board so that any current policies may be corrected where they are found to be inadequate. We will insist on total cooperation and compliance with local diocesan programs and requirements in the area of youth ministry.

4. Review of Current Policies

Our current, public policies governing the sexual abuse with minors will be stringently upheld, especially those regulating the placement and ministry of offenders. Article 9 of our policies states in part:

Where appropriate, the accused will be required to undergo a psychiatric evaluation by a mental health facility specializing in sexual disorders and approved by the Provincial.

When the psychiatric evaluation has been completed, the Provincial, in consultation with the Provincial Team and, where appropriate, with legal counsel and mental health professionals, will determine whether the friar should be permitted to minister and, if so, under what circumstances...

Ordinarily, no religious against whom a serious accusation has been substantiated will be permitted to return to public ministry unless: (a) he has undergone long-term psychotherapy (including prescribed medication) and the psychotherapist has advised that he is not a threat to the public; (b) he participates in a therapy group or life management support group; (c) it is possible to adequately supervise and monitor his contacts with the public; (d) he is subject to special placement and supervision by an on-site supervisor and the Provincial or his delegate.

5. Review Board

By August 1993 the Province will establish a separate review board designed to address the above areas of concern; it will make further recommendations to the provincial administration to insure the integrity of the friars' lives and ministries as these relate to minors. This board will also deal in a continuing manner with cases of sexual misconduct with minors which may arise.

This ongoing review board will be directly under the Provincial. It will be composed of five persons: two friars and three lay specialists. Articles of procedure will be drawn up and based on the best models currently available. These articles will be reviewed by the board itself and then approved by the provincial definitorium. The definitorium explicitly commits itself to the establishment of this permanent project.

A PASTORAL PLAN FOR ST. ANTHONY'S SEMINARY

With respect to the allegations involving the conduct of certain friars at St. Anthony's Seminary, the following steps will be taken:

PROVINCIAL POLICY AND PASTORAL RESPONSE

The friars will continue to be proactive in responding to known victims and their families through the offering of counseling, the identification of local resources, personal visits and remuneration for therapy.

Because there may be victims unnamed and undiscovered as yet, a Board of Inquiry (see below) will send a letter to all known students from the school year 1964-1965 to the time of the seminary's closure. While maintaining appropriate confidentiality and sensitivity, the Board will thus be able to identify the victims of sexual abuse, the perpetrators of the abuse and the credibility of the allegations. Established procedures will be followed to determine the truth as best as possible (outside of a court of law).

A formal Board of Inquiry will be established by the Province of St. Barbara (January 1993). The board will function independently of the Provincial administration and will report directly to the Provincial Minister. The board has an essentially pastoral purpose, acting for the good of the victims, the well being of the community and the friars, and the integrity of the Church. It is fact-finding, consultative and advisory, not adversarial or adjudicative. This board will process the results of past pupil contacts and investigate the allegations of sexual misconduct with minors and related issues at the seminary. It will follow Province policies on active care for victims.

This Board of Inquiry will have five members: an outside friar skilled in counseling and issues of sexual abuse (Fr. Dismas Bonner, O.F.M.); a professional layman (Dr. Eugene Merlin) with the same qualifications; three other members, one of whom will be a recovering victim and/or parent of a victim.

A draft of procedures will be drawn up under the authority of the Provincial Minister and the Board of Inquiry before final adoption in consultation with the Provincial Minister.

With respect to confidentiality, the "Chicago Policy Regarding Clerical Misconduct with Minors" principles will be invoked. Final recommendations and observations to the Provincial Minister will, respecting confidentiality, be made public jointly by the Board of Inquiry and the Provincial Minister.

After sufficient review, a friar established to have been an offender against minors will not return to active public ministry without thorough and enforceable guidelines as recommended by the Board of Inquiry.

In the course of the next five months, the friars will sponsor a series of fora to educate both the Franciscans and the local faith community on issues of child abuse and its implications; the spiritual dimensions and meaning for the church; and the identification of local resources in the area. These goals may be accomplished by a day of recollection or weekend retreat, workshops and study groups.

The Province will work with the archdiocese in sponsoring a workshop for the broader Catholic community in Santa Barbara for the purposes of education and community information.

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