

Peggy Noonan Is Out of Touch

A Response to the Wall Street Journal Article of April 17, 2010.

April 18, 2010. Peggy Noonan is usually so good. But I am afraid she is stuck in the past with regard to the Church's response to sexual abuse. (WSJ, April 17) She charges Vatican officials with complacency and declares, the "more relaxed the institution, the less likely it will reform".

But Peggy has apparently not noticed that tremendous reform *has* occurred. In fact, more reform has taken place in the Catholic Church than in any other social institution in which the abuse of minors has occurred. In 2002 the U. S. Bishops approved a Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. They hired the John Jay College of Criminal Justice to conduct an *independent* investigation of the problem. They established a National Review Board chaired by a woman (Peggy called for a woman's touch), Justice Anne M. Burke. The National Review Board monitors the policies of the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection of the bishops and oversees its annual audit. Five of its current 13 members have that "woman's touch". One of the original members of the Review Board was a media representative, William Burleigh, at the time head of the Scripps news agency. This was surely expressive of a desire on the part of the bishops for transparency.

The chairman of the research committee of the original National Review Board, Robert Bennett, said when the report was issued that the sexual abuse of minors was a broad social problem and that a focus merely on the Catholic Church would be a disservice to our children. Regrettably, however, that is exactly what has happened.

There will be media reports of sexual abuse by school teachers, Scout leaders, swimming coaches, and others, but they are fleeting. In March a judge ordered the Boy Scouts to release over 1,200 "perversion files" with Scout leaders who had molested boys. In early April a headline shouted, "Sex Abuse Pervasive in USA Swimming", with reports of molesters going unchallenged for decades as they moved from state to state. In 2002 Dr. Charol Shakeshaft of Hofstra University prepared a report for the U.S. Department of Education that found that 6 to 10 percent of high school students across the country have been sexually abused or harassed. "The physical sexual abuse of students in schools is likely more than 100 times the abuse by priests," she declared. However, such reports will surface for a day and then quickly recede from public consciousness.

Many have heard of the sexual abuse by clergy in Catholic schools in Germany. However, at the time these reports were surfacing, it was learned that a prestigious private boarding school had an unspeakable record of abuse of its own. The *Odenwaldschule* is a UNESCO model school whose administration would arrange to have students provide "entertainment" for visitors and whose male students were having sexual relations with the wives of teachers. A music teacher had numerous pupils living with him in his apartment. The administrator of the school was an advisor to the German Ministry of Education. Where were the headlines proclaiming that a UNESCO model school was engaged in the systematic molestation of children? In fact, when the report of the *Odenwaldschule* first appeared it was under a headline decrying abuse in Catholic schools!

None of these other social institutions have put safeguards in place that even begin to approach those that have been established by the Catholic Church. There is nothing on a national level that tracks

abusive school teachers, for example. And such negligence by these other institutions leaves more children at risk.

Frankly, the only pedophile our family has ever known personally was our children's dentist. He was married with children, an elder in his Protestant church, and delivered Meals on Wheels to shut-ins. He was also a child pornographer and abuser. If we are not vigilant against abuse everywhere, our children are at risk.

The reforms in the Church have been extensive, indicating anything but complacency. When Josef Ratzinger was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith he arranged for abuse cases be moved from another Vatican office to his own – not for purposes of cover-up but so that the cases could be dealt with in a more expeditious manner. In 2001 Pope John Paul II issued a decree *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela* drawn up by Cardinal Ratzinger. Among other things, it amended canon law in 18 places to allow a more effective response to charges of sexual abuse. Priests came to be more easily disciplined and defrocked, and they were.

Other reforms continued. One can visit the website of virtually any diocese in this country and there will be an icon taking the visitor to the policies pertaining to abuse. Most dioceses have a Victims' Assistance Coordinator who is a layperson to whom abuse can be reported if the victim would be uneasy approaching a cleric. The Church has also adopted a "zero tolerance" policy meaning that if a priest admits to any past sexual activity with a minor or is found guilty of it, he may no longer function as a priest. No other social institution has as many safeguards in place for dealing with perpetrators of these criminal acts.

All were shocked by the sexual abuse in Catholic and state institutions in Ireland. But is it known that the Church has been engaged for some time in addressing the problem?

In 1996 the Catholic Church in Ireland published *Child Sexual Abuse: Framework for a Church Response* which provided guidelines for dealing with abuse cases. The Bishops' Committee on Child Abuse actually commissioned independent research into the problem by the Royal College of Surgeons. Their report was published in 2003 as *A Time to Listen*. The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland had its inaugural meeting in May 2006 and was headed by the layman Justice Anthony Hederman. It is currently chaired by an attorney. Four of its members are women. (There's that woman's touch again, Peggy.) Pope Benedict severely criticized the Irish bishops for their handling of the abuse cases, and four have offered their resignation. And the Holy Father just met with abuse victims during his trip to Malta, not shying away from a public acknowledgment of the sins of those in the Church and the Church's desire to make amends. None of this seems to express complacency.

Peggy Noonan and others should recognize and applaud the reforms which have taken place in the Catholic Church and urge other institutions working with the young to be equally as bold and as far-reaching in establishing programs to protect our children.

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