

Diocese addressing abuse by Judith Audette, LICSW

As a licensed independent clinical social worker, I have been dealing with sexual abuse of children for many years through various agencies and I have witnessed the harm inflicted upon the most vulnerable members of society. This is a horrific crime and it is sad that society still grapples with abuse in homes, in schools, in sports, and even in places of worship.

I am also a practicing Catholic and, like so many other Catholics, I was devastated and often angry that this kind of demeaning abuse could happen at the hands of a priest. When the opportunity arose to assist on our Diocesan Review Committee, I accepted in order to bring my personal expertise with my own desire to do something.

That was almost eight years ago. As the issue continues to make the news, it's time for us to share what we have done here in Central Massachusetts, as a board of professionals dedicated to social work, child welfare, the law, and to the pastoral care of the people in this diocese, especially our young people.

Allow me to say that so much has changed over the last decade that it is hard to imagine things "the way they were." Too many people think that the Church has "swept this under the rug" after the initial response in 2002. That is simply not true, and any volunteer, priest or religious anywhere operated by the Catholic Church can attest to it. Do you want to chaperone, coach or teach kids, or be involved in any parish or school programs? Then you have agreed to background screening, been given a code of conduct to follow, and learned about signs and symptoms of abuse. A background check will happen every five years. To date, a staggering 42,000 background checks have been processed just in the past six years in this diocese!

Is this a Catholic problem? My professional career says "Absolutely not." Is it about priests and their vows of celibacy? Nationally, four percent of priests were found to have abused in the 1960s through 1980s so I would say not, especially in light of cases of abuse in society involving married people. What is upsetting to me and many other Catholics is that it was perpetrated by priests at all, since we placed so much trust in them. Yet as a social worker I know that it could also be a teacher, a coach, a policeman, or any authority figure in someone's life. It is an abuse of power with no respect for faith, oaths, or training.

The John Jay School of Criminal Justice was commissioned to study nationally the causes and contexts of these cases. This landmark work included interviews with every victim advocacy group in the U.S. including SNAP and Voice of the Faithful.

Most cases occurred in the 1960s and 1970s with a sharp decline in the mid 1980s. 90% of all reported cases occurred before 1990. The church began to learn along with society the signs and symptoms of child sexual assault. Nothing excuses this behavior, and for years we have been in a totally different era in the life of the church which has implemented policies and procedures that will only be improved upon, never to go away.

Our local committee heard the details of abuse recounted from nearly fifty victims since I began. All occurred in previous decades. I pray that what the church has been doing explains why no case of a minor being abused has come forward in two decades in our diocese involving our priests, and the one case involving a preschool worker was handled immediately by civil authorities. Contrast that with child welfare agencies dealing with abuse happening today in Central Massachusetts in homes, in schools, and involving various people of authority.

Adult victims are taking a huge step to approach the institution that failed them in their childhood. We are not a court of law, but the Review Committee assists the diocese's Victim Assistance Coordinator so that the church can offer emotional and spiritual healing to the best of its ability. My anger about the past is tempered by the forthright manner in which Bishop McManus, and previously Bishop Reilly, have met with victims and heard their experience first-hand, as well as their support for our recommendations as a committee. Together we are making a difference.

As appeared in the Telegram & Gazette, May 27, 2011