

I Was Once a Victim Too

John Salveson '77, '78M.A. was sexually abused by a priest when he was a teenager. His recovery has made him an advocate for children's rights and a fighter trying to stop it from happening to others.

BY JOHN SALVESON '77, '78M.A.

Sitting in Courtroom 304 of the Philadelphia Criminal Justice Center last summer, I couldn't take my eyes off of the defendant, Monsignor William Lynn. Lynn was secretary of clergy for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia from 1992 until 2004 and was on trial for two counts of child endangerment and one count of conspiracy.

The witness on the stand was Detective Joseph Walsh, a 35-year veteran of the Philadelphia Police Department who had spent the last decade of his career investigating one of the largest child sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. He held a pile of confidential church records. Many, written in the monsignor's own hand, revealed that Lynn had lied or misled others about the misconduct of a sexually abusive priest in his archdiocese — and ultimately had failed to protect children. As the detective read, the monsignor, red-faced, dropped his head and slowly shook it back and forth.

For John Salveson's original magazine story, "I Was Abused . . . and 25 Years Later, I'm Still Trying to Make Things Right," see magazine.nd.edu/news/11366/.

A few weeks later, on a sweltering summer day, I heard the news that Monsignor Lynn had been convicted of one count of child endangerment. It was the first time an American priest of the Roman Catholic Church had been convicted of a crime for covering up the sexual abuse perpetrated by a fellow priest. It was truly historic.

As I drove into Philadelphia to attend the district attorney's press conference and give media interviews, I reflected on the enormity of the conviction — one that I had been fighting for these past 30 years.

I began a campaign to stop the sexual abuse of children by priests by writing a letter in 1980 to John McGann, bishop of Rockville Centre, New York. In that letter, I told him that I had been abused by one of the priests in his diocese; I asked that he remove the priest from ministry.

For nine years, the bishop moved the priest from parish to parish — even to an all-boys high school — while building a sturdy brick wall between me and the diocese.

I always believed the actions of that bishop were worse than the actions of my own abuser. Yet those bishops and cardinals who



sheltered and enabled so many priest predators had gotten off scot-free.

Until now.

Thirty-two years after I wrote that first letter, a member of the Church hierarchy was finally going to prison.

The past decade

In 2003, when reports of the sex abuse crisis were rippling widely throughout the American Catholic Church, I wrote an article for this magazine that described my abuse by Father Robert D. Huneke, a diocesan priest, which occurred while I was growing up on Long Island and later after he followed me to Notre Dame.

At that time, I viewed the clergy sex abuse crisis as a “Catholic problem.” I focused almost entirely on the abuse of children and minors by Roman Catholic priests, and the subsequent cover-up and protection of those priests by so many bishops and cardinals in America. I felt that the solution to this crisis lay with the Church itself.

I was confident that healing would begin when the bishops would admit to their mistakes and help the victims.

So I threw myself into the battle to hold the Church accountable in myriad ways. I ran the Philadelphia Chapter of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), the most visible of the activist survivors’ support groups, and I joined its national board of directors. I met with Kathleen McChesney, the FBI agent hired by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to help clean up the mess. I spoke to multiple chapters of Voice of the Faithful, committed Catholics whose motto was “Keep the Faith, Change the Church” as they worked to support abuse survivors.

I also spoke to a packed house about the sex abuse crisis during a Notre Dame reunion. I met with Carol Ann Mooney, now president of Saint Mary’s College, who was then at Notre Dame and served as the chair of the University’s own task force examining the problem of sex abuse. At the Long Island parish where I grew up, I spoke to 400 parishioners who were trying to oust their pastor. He was, according to a 2003 report issued by a grand jury in Suffolk County, New York, a central player in the cover-up of the abuse committed in that diocese. Throughout this period, I gave

television, print and radio interviews, held press conferences and wrote Op-Ed pieces for newspapers.

I always told my story in a passionate, honest way. People cried. Many told me how brave I was. Always, someone came up after each presentation to talk about their own abuse. It was usually more than one person.

Everyone told me how important this work was.

But slowly I began to understand that something was deeply wrong. First, these efforts took a significant emotional toll on me. The work also took up an increasing amount of my time and energy. I have an otherwise demanding life as a business owner, husband and father. I never felt I was giving enough of myself to anything. I was exhausted, angry and confused.

Most alarming of all, nothing was improving. All those people in the pews, who kept telling me how wonderful I was and were asking if I could give another talk, were sitting quietly by. As far as I could tell, they were doing almost nothing meaningful or effective to attempt to change their Church. I had no doubt that they were genuinely upset, bitter and angry. But I wondered if they were capable of little more than listening to a survivor like me and showing the proper empathy.

Ten years have passed, and a lot has happened as the Church and society struggle with this issue of child sexual abuse. But a lot has not. And both the heightened awareness and activity as well as the continued stonewalling and inaction have affected my own recovery as an abuse survivor.

Finally — and most important — the Church just hasn’t changed enough. It has improved its public relations strategies, established Victim Assistance Programs and, for the most part, become compliant with the rules established by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

But as a front-line soldier in this war, I could see clearly that many in the Church continued to do those things that created the crisis in the first place — treating victims like legal adversaries, refusing to identify and sometimes hiding abusive priests as well as allowing them to serve in active ministry and, most important, failing to hold a single bishop or cardinal accountable for their role in enabling the rape of thousands of Catholic children.

This was progress? Not in my eyes — and apparently not in the eyes of the people in the pews either. In the days surrounding the departure of Pope Benedict XVI, the Church’s sexual abuse crisis was a common theme among media and Church leaders. A *New York Times* article, citing a poll taken of Catholics just prior to the conclave to elect a new pope, reported, “Seven out of 10 say Pope Benedict XVI and the Vatican have done a poor job of handling sexual abuse, a significant rise from three years ago. A majority said that the issue had led them to question the Vatican’s authority. The sexual abuse of children by priests is the largest problem facing the church, Catholics in the poll said.”

Clearly, the damage done to the Church by the abuse scandal persists, with significantly more Catholics critical of the Church’s handling of the situation today than just a few years ago.

A revelation

Slowly, eventually, I figured out the reason for the lack of progress within the Church. It really was simple. I had long believed the Roman Catholic Church considered the child sex-abuse crisis to be a moral issue. So I expected clergy to care about the victims and to do the right thing.

But the simple truth I had learned over time was this: Much of the Catholic leadership does not view this as a moral issue. They view it as a risk-management issue. The focus is on managing settlements, keeping the topic out of the media, telling the faithful everything is taken care of and, most of all, doing everything humanly possible to ensure none of these cases ever make it into a court of law.

An institution focused on doing the right thing would admit wrongdoing, immediately remove abusive priests from ministry, embrace victims, reach out to their families, do everything possible to help them heal, and work to change laws that hide perpetrators and deny justice to victims.

However, an institution focused on risk management never admits actual culpability; it protects predator priests, does the bare minimum for victims and works to keep outdated laws in place to protect perpetrators.

Suddenly it all made sense. In my own case, I always wondered why the bishop I wrote to in 1980 ignored my first letter to him. I wondered why he refused to tell those pastors and other bishops supervising my perpetrator that he had been accused of sexual abuse. And why in all of those nine years of pestering the Diocese of Rockville Centre to dismiss the priest, I never received a written acknowledgement that the priest had in fact abused me. I wanted supportive, empathetic — some might call it Christian — action from the Church. I had not realized they were just managing risk.

To this day I still am embarrassed by how long it took me to understand this.

A new focus

When all of this finally became clear to me, I shifted the direction of my efforts. Instead of trying to get the Church to change, I focused on the societal institutions that are supposed to protect children but which had miserably failed to protect young Catholics from predator priests. I created FACSAs, the Foundation to Abolish Child Sex Abuse (abolishsexabuse.org), and I directed my energy to changing the criminal justice system and the laws covering child sex abuse, and to working with the media.

Even though I knew the problem of child sex abuse extended far beyond the Catholic Church, I had failed to see the power of joining forces with other advocates for children working on this issue. I ended my involvement in SNAP and, for the most part, stopped working with other Catholic organizations. I still respected their work — I just didn't find it to be ultimately effective or affirming for me.

The primary focus of FACSAs has been to change the laws governing the sexual abuse of children. Though these laws differ from state

to state, they are profoundly outdated and dangerous. Simply put, they protect predators instead of children — because most statutes of limitations allow only a relatively brief time during which victims of abuse can file criminal charges or civil suits. Additionally, many of the laws related to reporting child sexual abuse often shield people who are aware of abuse but do nothing to stop it.

For example, according to the September 17, 2005, report of a Philadelphia grand jury that investigated child sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, "*Cardinal Bevilacqua was asked repeatedly when he testified before the Grand Jury why he and his aides never reported these crimes to law enforcement. His answer was simply that Pennsylvania law did not require them to.*"

That quote, after all of these years of working on this problem, still takes my breath away. But the cardinal was correct. He knew he had a legal obligation to report child sex abuse only if he discovered it through contact with a victim of abuse. It didn't count if he knew about it through his staff.

Ingenious, as a risk-management strategy. Reprehensible as a moral decision.

It was when I testified in 2002 at a grand jury in Suffolk County, New York, investigating sexual abuse in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, where my abuse took place, that I first found myself involved with an institution which actually believed me, understood the criminal nature of what had

happened to me, genuinely wanted to understand my story and was trying to do something about it. That was affirming and liberating. The grand jury was unable to bring any indictments because of the weak criminal statutes, but this excerpt from that grand jury report, while horrifying, confirmed many of my worst fears and beliefs:

"The response of priests in the Diocesan hierarchy to allegations of criminal sexual abuse was not pastoral. In fact, although there was a written policy that set a pastoral tone, it was a sham. The Diocese failed to follow the policy from its inception even at its most rudimentary level. Abusive priests were transferred from parish to parish and between Dioceses. Abusive priests were protected under the guise of confidentiality; their histories mired in secrecy. Professional treatment recommendations were ignored and dangerous priests allowed to minister to children. Diocesan policy was to expend as little financial capital as possible to assist victims but to be well prepared for the possibility of enormous financial and legal liability. Aggressive legal strategies were employed to defeat and discourage lawsuits even though Diocesan officials knew they were meritorious. . . . These themes framed a system that left thousands of children in the Diocese exposed to predatory, serial, child molesters working as priests."

In Philadelphia, my home, I testified in front of a grand jury investigating the sexual abuse of children in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Here is an excerpt from that grand jury's report, issued in late September of 2005:

"The Archdiocese's 'handling' of the abuse scandal was at least as immoral as the abuse itself. The evidence before us established that Archdiocese officials at the highest levels received reports of abuse; that they chose not to conduct any meaningful investigation of those

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reports; that they left dangerous priests in place or transferred them to different parishes as a means of concealment; that they never alerted parents of the dangers posed by these offenders (who typically went out of their way to be friendly and helpful, especially with children); that they intimidated and retaliated against victims and witnesses who came forward about abuse; that they manipulated 'treatment' efforts in order to create a false impression of action; and that they did many of these things in a conscious effort simply to avoid civil liability."

Despite uncovering decades of deliberate acts protecting and enabling abusive priests, neither the New York nor Philadelphia grand juries were able to issue criminal indictments. They were blocked by arcane laws on reporting child abuse and an antiquated, ridiculously short statute of limitations.

Both grand jury reports called for changes in the civil and criminal laws related to child sexual abuse. In Pennsylvania this led to a concerted statewide effort, in which FACSAs played a central role, to criminalize many of the things done routinely in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and other institutions when they learned of a sexual predator in their midst. It was this effort that led to my initiation into the legislative process, giving me a new perspective on influence, money and power.



When we got to Harrisburg, our state capital, we quickly learned that the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, a statewide lobbying organization funded by each of the eight dioceses in the Commonwealth, was leading the opposition to defeat the legislative recommendations of the grand jury, as was the Insurance Federation of Pennsylvania, which was focused on reducing insurance claims for its members. But in the end, those of us pushing for the changes prevailed, thanks in part to some excellent investigative reporting by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, which uncovered attempts to undermine the legislation.

I stood behind Ed Rendell, who was then the governor of Pennsylvania, when he signed the bill into law. We didn't get everything we wanted, but I was finally beginning to feel that we were making some progress in protecting children.

Problem solved?

Many Catholics consider these revelations old hat. They believe the promises that things have changed. Certainly the faithful in Philadelphia believed their leaders' promises that they had corrected the problems which were exposed in the searing 2005 grand jury report. But their trust was shattered when a second grand jury, looking again at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, released its report in February 2011. It concluded:

"The present grand jury, however, is frustrated to report that much

has not changed. The rapist priests we accuse were well known to the Secretary of Clergy, but he cloaked their conduct and put them in place to do it again. The procedures implemented by the Archdiocese to help victims are in fact designed to help the abusers, and the Archdiocese itself. Worst of all, apparent abusers — dozens of them, we believe — remain on duty in the Archdiocese, today, with open access to new young prey."

That grand jury identified "41 priests who have remained in active ministry in the past five years after the Archdiocese learned of accusations or reports of their inappropriate behavior or sexual abuse of minors. Only 2 of these 41 have been listed on the Archdiocese's website as credibly accused, which means the identity of most of these priests remains unknown even to their parishioners."

Unlike the 2005 grand jury report, this one included 24 criminal charges, including rape, indecent assault and endangering the welfare of a child, against three priests and a teacher.

The biggest bombshell of all was the indictment of Monsignor William Lynn on two counts of child endangerment and one count of conspiracy. Lynn was not charged with sexually abusing children. But he was the first senior official of the Catholic Church in the United States to be indicted for sheltering predator priests. The indictments against the monsignor were possible for one reason only — because of

the laws that were changed after the 2005 Philadelphia grand jury.

Ultimately, Lynn was convicted of one count of endangering the welfare of a child. He is serving a sentence of three to six years in a Pennsylvania prison.

The best tool of all

The work of grand juries has had a profound impact on exposing the actions of sexual predators and their enablers. But far and away the most effective tool to protect children and identify sexual predators requires changes to the civil statutes of limitations.

In most states, victims of abuse must file civil suits soon after the abuse took place — often within a few years. Unfortunately, the impact of the abuse makes it virtually impossible for most victims to meet this time requirement. The National Center for Victims of Crime refers to the sex abuse of children as a "silent crime" because victims are often so traumatized they have difficulty coming forward. Since most criminal statutes of limitations are short as well, predators all too often escape the court system entirely, remaining in locker rooms, Cub Scout packs and rectories — hiding in plain sight.

Three states (California, Delaware and Hawaii) have enacted legislation that extends the statute of limitations for sex abuse victims and which opens a one- or two-year "window" for past victims to bring civil suits against their abusers regardless of when the abuse occurred. Because of that window, victims from the past have begun

to file civil suits. Those suits involve “discovery,” which calls for the disclosure of pertinent information. As a result, thousands of documents that identify alleged abusers who previously had been protected have become public.

In California, more than 800 suits were filed against the Church in 2003 alone, and those suits led to the public identification of more than 300 alleged perpetrators previously unidentified. The Delaware window, instituted in 2007, also exposed many alleged abusers previously unidentified.

The Church has spent millions of dollars to lobby against these windows, stating its concerns about the financial costs of legal actions and settlements. However, once lawsuits began, the behaviors of members of the institution suggest a different reason for fighting the windows allowing civil litigation — the exposure that civil suits create. In Los Angeles, where at least 500 suits were filed, the archdiocese paid settlements totaling \$660 million in 2007 but then fought to maintain the secrecy of the documents produced in the cases. After six years and millions of dollars in legal expenses, the archdiocese lost its fight — and the documents were released to the public.

On February 1, 2013, *The New York Times* reported, “Over four decades, particularly under Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, parishioners in the nation’s largest Roman Catholic archdiocese repeatedly tried to alert church authorities about abusive priests in their midst, trusting that the church would respond appropriately.

“But the internal personnel files on 124 priests released by the archdiocese under court order on Thursday reveal a very different response: how church officials initially disbelieved them and grew increasingly alarmed over the years, only as multiple victims of the same priest came forward and reported similar experiences.

“Even then, in some cases, priests were shuttled out of state or out of the country to avoid criminal investigations.”

Many experts expect that as those documents are reviewed, other perpetrators may be discovered and criminal behavior unearthed on the part of those who protected predator priests for so many years.

What now?

Over the past several years, it seems that the world has become more sensitive to the sexual abuse of children. In the Catholic Church, evidence of abuse and cover-ups by Church leaders has been exposed in Ireland, Mexico and several other countries across the globe. The Boy Scouts of America have admitted to decades of problems with abusive scout leaders, whose names they carefully recorded in their “perversion files.” Jerry Sandusky and the inadequate response from Penn State administrators when they discovered his abuse brought the discussion to an even wider consciousness.

On good days, I feel like the tide might be turning. On bad days, I despair about how long it has taken and how far we have to go. I’ve been told — mostly by clergy — that I need to forgive my perpetrator and the Church leaders who enabled his abuse.

But I view forgiveness differently. For me it’s the final step in a process that would begin with a full admission from the Church of what its leaders have done, followed by an apology for their actions, fixing the wreckage they caused and making changes to be sure this never happens again. When all of that happens, I’ll start considering forgiveness.

I feel I am constantly on the verge of burnout when it comes to my work on the abuse issue. I am tired of raising money for the

Foundation to Abolish Child Sex Abuse, discouraged by the uphill legislative battles and resentful of people who express outrage but do nothing. One of the many therapists I have seen over the years would periodically ask me if my activity on this issue was making a deposit or a withdrawal in my personal bank of emotional well-being. For too long, the answer has been that it has mostly been withdrawals. Another therapist suggested to me that maybe it was time to explore another part of my life.

But I have been blessed by an unbelievably supportive and loving wife, who has put up with the pain and exhaustion of my “crusade” for more than 30 years. And by children who love and accept me, extended family who believe in me and friends who help me. I have been given a rich life and feel an obligation to do what I can to help. And in some strange way I consider it a privilege to have been part of the band of early activists addressing this issue.

So here I am, back at it and writing another article for *Notre Dame Magazine*. I find it incredibly hard to try to forget this issue and my abuse. And every once in a while something happens that is truly remarkable — like the experience of sitting in that criminal courtroom in Philadelphia witnessing justice taking place.

Hope for the future

In January I spoke at a press conference in the rotunda of the Pennsylvania State House. The topic was the introduction of two new bills that would alter the statute of limitations to give child sex abuse victims a shot at justice and at the same time would expose predators still hidden. It wasn’t my first press conference in Harrisburg, but as I stood there I reflected on how different this media conference was.

Behind me stood 10 legislators, showing their support for the bills. In the past, we could barely get one legislator to stand with us. Members of the media also were out in force. At previous news conferences I was lucky to have a single reporter from a local newspaper as an audience.

But the most extraordinary thing about this press conference happened when State Representative Louise Bishop, sponsor of one of the bills, stood up and described in excruciating detail the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather more than 60 years ago. Next, State Representative Mark Rozzi, co-sponsor, spoke of his abuse at the hands of a priest and the guilt he carries over the suicides of two of his childhood friends who also were abused by a priest. Bishop and Rozzi said their own abuse had a profound effect on their lives and fueled their desire to change the laws of Pennsylvania, which left children at risk from sexual predators.

As I stood in the rotunda and listened to their anguished revelations, I couldn’t help but remember the years of listening to bishops and cardinals refusing to admit there was a problem, much less that they had any personal culpability. I remembered the reporters and media outlets in the past that had all the facts but were afraid to cover this issue. I remembered being told countless times that the victims would never be able to overcome the power, money and influence of the forces arrayed against us.

I remembered all these things, and many more, and then I repeated to myself the words credited to Mahatma Gandhi, which have been my mantra and my hope for these 32 years: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” □