

Abuse victims say Catholic Church must do more to atone for predatory priests

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Each morning when he wakes and walks to his shower, Mark Rozzi is reminded of a priest from his childhood, and the nightmare that unfolded in the rectory back in 1983.

He was a 13-year-old student and altar boy at Holy Guardian Angels Catholic Church and school in his hometown of Reading, about 65 miles north of Philadelphia, when he was raped in the shower by the Rev. Edward Graff.

Rozzi said he managed to get away and told his parents, who complained to the principal, but Graff was never prosecuted. Instead, like so many other priests accused of abuse, he was transferred to other churches, Rozzi said. Eventually, the priest was arrested in Texas and died while in custody before trial.

Rozzi later discovered that several of his friends had been abused by Graff as well; one struggled for years with mental illness and unemployment until he committed suicide this year, on Good Friday.

“I have seen my friends kill themselves, my friends become alcoholics and drug addicts, and then the church make a mockery of us,” he said.

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For Rozzi and other clergy abuse victims, this week’s visit to the United States by Pope Francis presents an opportunity -- to remind the world of the pain inflicted by pedophile priests and to hold the church more accountable for their crimes.

Although Francis has moved to prevent and punish clergy abuse, victims say the Roman Catholic Church in the United States continues to fight proposed laws that would allow the prosecution of crimes committed long ago.

Another victim in Philadelphia, John Salveson, said it’s tough for those who survived abuse to enjoy the pope’s impending arrival at the World Meeting of Families.

“It’s a different experience for those who were abused by priests and were not helped by the church,” Salveson, 59, said of the gathering. “You want to just go under your bed and hide.”

Salveson said he wants Francis and other church leaders to address clergy sex abuse during his visit and to wear black ribbons -- “to send a message to survivors that we know you exist, we need to do better by you and amid this event of such joy, we acknowledge you.”

For more than a decade, the abuse scandal rocked parishes across the nation, with many dioceses making hefty financial settlements.

The Los Angeles Archdiocese agreed in 2007 to pay more than 500 abuse victims \$660 million. Later settlements pushed the archdiocese’s tab to more than \$740 million.

Accusations of cover-ups by church officials around the country persist. But in a study released last month by the Public Religion Research Institute, when Americans were asked to share associations with the pope, only 5% were negative, including the clergy abuse scandal.

Former Catholics were five times more likely than current Catholics to mention clergy sex abuse scandals (11% versus 2%).

That could be because the pope has addressed the scandal publicly, promising “zero tolerance” for predatory priests. He recently created an advisory Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which includes two abuse victims, and at the commission’s request, also created a tribunal to judge bishops accused of covering up or failing to act in cases of child sex abuse by priests.

“There is no place in the church’s ministry for those who commit these abuses, and I commit myself not to tolerate harm done to a minor by any individual, whether a cleric or not,” and to hold all bishops accountable for protecting young people, the pope said during a special Mass last year for a half-dozen European victims of clergy abuse he met with at the Vatican.

Juneau Bishop Edward Burns, who leads the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, said they have followed the pope’s directive to expand abuse prevention and outreach.

“Our heart absolutely aches that there has been such an unprecedented scandal over the child sex abuse crisis and we are striving to do everything we can to reach out to those who have been abused,” Burns said.

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More than 35,000 priests have undergone background checks and have been trained to spot warning signs of abuse, according to an audit last year. More than 4.4 million children -- 92% of

those educated by the church -- have been taught abuse prevention.

Last year, 294 people reported abuse, some of it from years past, and dioceses provided outreach and support to more than 1,700 victims, Burns said.

“I hope that everyone that reaches out to the church in need receives the necessary response, especially those who are survivors of sexual abuse,” Burns said.

Told that some victims complained that the church failed to help them, Burns said, “I cringe to think that that happens.”

Burns said the church doesn't categorically oppose extending statutes of limitations for filing child sex abuse cases. But he said that the limits exist for a reason -- because evidence and witnesses disappear over time -- and any extensions should apply to cases brought against all institutions, not just the church.

The pope is not scheduled to meet with U.S. victims of clergy sex abuse, although such a meeting likely would not be announced in advance out of respect for victims' privacy, Burns said.

At a religious conference in August, Philadelphia Archbishop Charles J. Chaput said it's important to the pope to meet with abuse victims while he's here.

Last year, Chaput held a “Mass for Healing for Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse” in which he apologized on behalf of the church.

He noted that when he took over in 2011, the Philadelphia archdiocese was reeling from a second grand jury investigation that resulted in multiple criminal indictments, including the first U.S. priest convicted of concealing abuse: Msgr. William Lynn, who was transferred in July from a prison Francis is scheduled to visit. (Prison officials said the move was unrelated to the pope).

Ken Gavin, a spokesman for the archdiocese, said it has “a very strong victim assistance program in place which works diligently to assist survivors and their families on their paths to healing. These commitments are ongoing and steadfast.”

Rozzi and other victims disagree. Before Chaput was transferred to Philadelphia, he developed a reputation in Denver for fighting legislation that would have extended the statute of limitations for child sex abuse claims, they said.

In Pennsylvania, Chaput and the church have successfully fought the reforms, said Rozzi, now a state representative.

Marci Hamilton, a professor at Cardozo Law School in New York who has assisted Philadelphia

clergy abuse victims and served on the 2005 grand jury said, "There has been no formal outreach from the archdiocese in Philadelphia or the Vatican to any of the survivors I know of."

"For many of the survivors, this is just another opportunity for revictimization, because part of that is being ignored," Hamilton said.

While other states such as California, Florida, Georgia and Utah have changed their laws to make it easier for child sex abuse victims to file criminal and civil cases, Hamilton said Pennsylvania's Republican-dominated Legislature has been swayed by the church, killing proposals for the last decade.

"The church tends to treat all clergy abuse survivors as the enemy," said Salveson, a corporate headhunter and father of three. "The only help I was offered was in 1989: they told me I could go to Catholic Social Services and get counseling from a priest. If I was to construct a nightmare scenario for myself, that would be it."

He knows another abuse victim who has become a homeless heroin addict. The man's mother sought help from church officials, who resisted to the point that she recently told Salveson she has given up.

"She can't call them anymore because it just makes her so angry," he said, adding: "It makes her even crazier that the perpetrators have full health insurance and benefits and her son is living on the street."

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Salveson said the church has perpetuated a "false narrative" that extending statutes of limitations and agreeing to abuse settlements will bankrupt them, forcing them to eliminate services for the needy.

Rozzi noted that the church spent millions defending Lynn and other priests and is paying \$45 million for the World Meeting of Families. The Legislature's Republican leadership has budgeted \$5 million in assistance.

Rozzi called the spending "infuriating" and vowed that before the state budget is approved, "I will do everything I can to take it out."

On Monday, Rozzi held a briefing with a bipartisan group of lawmakers, Salveson and other advocates for child sex abuse victims to announce his new proposal raising the maximum age at which child sex abuse victims can file civil lawsuits from 30 to 50. He called on fellow lawmakers and the church to support it.

“If he was serious about helping victims and stopping this, he would turn to the archbishops and say enough is enough, we committed these egregious crimes and need to be held accountable like anyone else,” Rozzi said. “We can't change what happened in the past, but we can make this right for all the victims. And it starts at the top.”

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Los Angeles Times staff writer Sarah Parvini contributed to this report.

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