

OPINION

Patricia Anastasio: Our duty to victims of priest sex abuse

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS 11/07/2015 5:00 AM ET



The church has learned and changed

The movie "Spotlight," in theaters Friday, is refocusing the public's attention on sexual abuse of minors

and the failings of some Catholic Church leaders at the time to respond appropriately to this horrific crime and sin. While I have not yet seen the film, I have heard many positive things about it — even from a reviewer at Vatican Radio! — and I look forward to seeing it soon.

Catholic or otherwise, all of our eyes should be wide open to this story. It is wrenching but necessary truth to absorb.

It might at first seem odd to say, but we as a church owe a tremendous debt to the journalists — not only in Boston, but here at the Daily News, and at hundreds of other newspapers, radio stations and TV newsrooms — who exposed a serious and nauseating problem that needed to change.

The media scrutiny led to important reforms, and a vastly improved response to the evil of sexual abuse of minors, not just in the Catholic Church and other faiths, but at public elementary and secondary schools, sports leagues, the Boy Scouts and other institutions.

I'm tempted to say we learned a painful lesson, but I recognize that the pain experienced by the victims and survivors of clergy sexual abuse far outweighs the sorrow and shame we feel as a church.

Since 2002, in the New York Archdiocese, we have adhered to a zero-tolerance policy — permanently removing any priest, deacon, religious or lay employee or volunteer who is found to have sexually abused a minor at any time. As someone who has spent most of her career as a teacher and principal in inner-city elementary schools and as the current chair of the Archdiocesan Review Board, which examines allegations of sexual abuse by clergy after the allegations have gone to the proper civil authorities, it is my responsibility to make sure that we do not back away from this policy.

Since the early 2000s, the New York Archdiocese has, like other dioceses in New York and around the country, conducted background checks on tens of thousands of volunteers, staff and priests who might interact with children. We participate in annual independent compliance audits to ensure our parishes, pastors, teachers and volunteers are following the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People adopted by the nation's bishops in 2002. We have consistently been found to be in compliance with the provisions of that charter.

In fact, Dr. Paul McHugh, a leading expert on sexual abuse at Johns Hopkins University, who helped the bishops implement their strict procedures, has noted that today the Catholic Church is one of the safest places for children and minors .

working tirelessly to create a culture of accountability for adults and protection for children that is among the most robust of any institution in the country.

Timothy Cardinal Dolan and the Catholic Bishops of New York State are serious about protecting

children from sexual abuse, not only in Catholic settings but throughout society. They support legislative efforts that would extend civil and criminal statutes of limitations going forward, wherever the abuse occurred, so survivors have more time to seek justice, as well as expanded mandated reporting laws that would include clergy and other professions, and mandatory background checks and safe environment training in any organization, public or private, where adults interact with children.

Having others focus intensely on your flaws is not pleasant, but bringing mistakes and shortcomings into the light is an important first step in fixing what is broken in ourselves and our institutions. I hope and pray that "Spotlight" will remind us of our need to never be afraid to face the truth and do everything in our power to protect God's children placed in our care.

Sister Anastasio chairs the New York Archdiocese's Advisory Review Board, which investigates allegations of sexual misconduct.





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