

## CHURCH, HOFFMAN AND STATUTES OF LIMITATION

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During his recent visit to Australia, Pope Benedict XVI made a forthright public apology to victims of the abuse that has rocked the church in recent years.

There is no doubt that the pope's words meant a great deal to the victims of clerical sex abuse with whom he met but it is now time to put the sincerity of those words to the test.

During his visit to the United States in April Pope Benedict XVI vowed repeatedly "to do what is possible so that this cannot happen again in the future."

In Australia the pope spoke to senior clergy saying he was "deeply sorry" for the suffering caused by the acts of officials. He went on to say that "these misdeeds, which constitute so grave a betrayal of trust, deserve unequivocal condemnation. They have caused great pain and have damaged the Church's witness."

However, not one bishop has been removed from office because of his own complicity, collusion or cover-up of the church's continuing sexual abuse problems. Nor has anyone been forced to resign for violating either the Roman Catholic Church's own Canon Law or society's criminal law.

Even when the Archdiocese of Boston imploded in 2002, church authorities were quick to say former Boston Cardinal Bernard Law's resignation had nothing to do with his mishandling of the scandal in the Boston church.

A number of bishops in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and across the United States continue to fight tooth and nail against releasing records and even the names and locations of known predators while opposing the growing momentum to better protect the human and civil rights of children by totally removing statutes of limitation and providing for a civil window of at least two years for bringing forward previously time barred cases.

The recent removal of the Rev. Gerard J. Hoffman from his assignment as parochial vicar at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Doylestown should remind everyone that the problem of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church is an ongoing one as it is in all religious denominations and in society at large.

Hoffman like anyone accused of violating professional boundaries, particularly when it concerns the sexual abuse or molestation of a child, is entitled to his due process rights as set forth both in church law and civil law.

That being said however, the 2005 Philadelphia Grand Jury Report documents the fact that the institutional church's problems are much more systemic, going deeper than simply one individual's possible violation of a child and subsequent fall from grace.

The transparency and accountability for the sins and crimes of the past that was promised by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002 has yet to be realized in dioceses across the country and it is doubtful that any religious

institutions, any more than an Enron or a Goldman Sachs, have the objectivity or freedom to be their own policing agency when their reports are made to officials who may or may not accept or act on them.

Investigations in a number of dioceses have pointed out past violations of the church's own Canon Law regarding sexual abuse by some of these same officials.

Unlike the Archdiocese of Boston, Massachusetts, none of the thousands of pages of subpoenaed files on known sexual abusers in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia have been made public. The grand jury members had access to those files but the public at large has not.

Unless or until files and records of known sexual predators are made public together with the present locations of removed or laicized offenders, the laity understandably remains skeptical of the institutional church's professed dedication in this regard.

Religious denominations should be pro-actively engaged in the protection of all children. This is a Right to Life issue every bit as much as is the protection of the unborn.

To this end the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, together with all the dioceses of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania through the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, should be supporting the total removal of all criminal and civil statutes of limitation in regard to the sexual abuse of children.

More than that, all religious institutions, especially the Roman Catholic Church, should be supporting rather than opposing the inclusion of at least a two year civil legislative window for previously time barred cases of child abuse for predators of all stripes.

This is not a catholic problem, a priest, minister, rabbi or imam problem. It is a child abuse problem and religious institutions worth their steeples or minarets should take heed.

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