

Twelve Things the Bishops Have Learned From the Abuse Crisis

BY BLASE CUPICH

The Catholic bishops of the United States have learned many lessons from the sexual abuse crisis. These 12 are among the most important.

1. The injury to victims is deeper than non-victims can imagine. Sexual abuse of minors is crushing precisely because it comes at a stage in their lives when they are vulnerable, tender with enthusiasm, hopeful for the future and eager for friendships based on trust and loyalty.

2. Despite the justified anger felt by victims toward the church, bishops still need to reach out to them as pastors. Meetings with victims can be challenging for all involved, but they also can be a moment of grace and insight.

3. The causes of the clerical sexual abuse are complex, and it is simplistic to reduce them to easy answers. Many factors have been alleged to "explain" this misconduct by clergy, but the fact is that sexual abuse of minors is found in many different circumstances, perpetrated by family members, leaders of youth organizations, doctors, teachers and others. "Easy answers" underestimate how wide the scope of this problem is in our society.

4. Catholics have been hurt by the moral failings of some priests, but they have been hurt and angered even more by bishops who failed to put children first. People expect religious leaders above all to be immediate and forthright in taking a strong stand in the face of evil, such as the harm done

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to children and young people by sexual abuse.

5. The counsel of lay people, especially parents, is indispensable in a matter that so deeply affects families. Our capacity to respond to sexual abuse of young people has been bolstered by the insights shared with us by parents as to how to do so effectively.

6. Our priests have a resiliency that future generations will recall with admiration. They have remained committed to their vocation day-in, day-out, despite suffering from the actions of those who have besmirched the priesthood they love. Their steadfastness has built a reservoir of good will with our people and is a major factor in explaining why during this terrible crisis most Catholics in our country remain faithful to the church.

7. The church needs to maintain the mandatory safe environment efforts that have been developed. Experience shows that institutions are not as effective in protecting children if standards are voluntary. Any backsliding on this endangers children first of all, and also the credibility gained through the efforts to eradicate the effects of this scourge. Parishes must be the safest places for a child to be.

8. Bishops need to be mutually accountable in their efforts to protect children and must be willing to participate in transparent, independent audits to demonstrate they are keeping the promises we made. What happens in one place happens to us all.

9. Bishops need to resist the defensiveness that institutions often fall back on in crisis moments. Resorting

to a conspiratorial interpretation of attacks and adopting a "circle the wagons" approach only prolongs a problem and does nothing to settle it or heal the victims.

10. Self-deception is an inherent part of the illness abusers suffer and includes the inclination to diminish the gravity of their behavior and its effects on the individuals abused and on the church at large. Many even manage to convince themselves that they genuinely cared for the children whom they harmed. This makes it almost impossible for them to come to grips with the evil they perpetrated. Claims often made by perpetrators in the past that they were contrite and would stop abusing are never again going to be taken at face value.

11. Our people's faith is strong and sustains them even in times of challenge. We receive from them a level of emotional and spiritual support that humbles us. Their trust in God sustains not just themselves but us too.

12. Bishops must partner with public authorities by complying with civil laws with respect to reporting allegations of sexual abuse of minors and cooperating with their investigation. All leaders of the community whether religious or secular need to work together to protect children and young people.

The *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, which we bishops adopted in 2002 and renewed twice since, provides direction for our handling the sexual abuse of minors by priests. It can be found on the U.S.C.C.B. Web site at <http://www.usccb.org/ocyp/charter.shtml>.