

Lessons Learned: A Time for the Church to Lead (February 2018)

The following is an Op-Ed from Dr. Francesco Cesareo, Chair of the National Review Board (the NRB) for the Protection of Children and Young People. The NRB is a lay group that advises the U.S. Bishops on matters of child and youth protection. Archdiocese and dioceses around the country are invited to share this Op-Ed with local media. The article highlights the efforts of dioceses in protecting children, and notes that secular organizations can learn from the practices of dioceses to better prevent abuse.

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Sexual abuse by those in positions of influence and power continues in this country.

While the first light into such terrible acts was shed upon the Catholic Church more than a decade ago, since then incidents at institutions of higher learning, the USA Gymnastics team, among Hollywood executives, in the halls of government and even public schools, sexual abuse of minors – and adults – persists as a menace to our society and a threat to the innocent.

Sadly, the Church and the aforementioned organizations failed victims of abuse. Too often, the entities sought to protect the accused or the institution and the victim was forgotten. This same response was apparently employed by Penn State University, Michigan State University, Hollywood executives, and the United States Congress when those organizations were recently faced with accusations of sexual abuse or sexual assault. Instead of learning from the mistakes of the Church, they protected the institution, exasperating the victims' pain and trauma.

While these organizations failed to learn from the mistakes of the Church, they would be well-informed to look to the Church with regard to its comprehensive and unprecedented response to its sexual abuse crisis.

Following a 2002 meeting of the U.S. Bishops in Dallas, TX, the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* was approved. This *Charter*, which was adopted to address "allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy" provides comprehensive "guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability and prevention of future acts of abuse." Since the *Charter* was implemented, incidents of new allegations that have occurred since 2002 has decreased significantly. Why, then, have other embattled institutions – higher education, USA Gymnastics, Hollywood, and the U.S. Government – not looked to the success of the Church's response and implemented their own programs to prevent such acts and aid victims of abuse?

These organizations could collectively benefit – and more importantly victims of sexual abuse and assault -- from looking to and learning from the Church on how to effectively respond to the sin and crime of abuse. The cost of sexual abuse should not be measured in financial settlements, rather by the number of lives shattered from ignoring the allegations. We must begin a process now of learning from the past and looking to the Church as a model for how to serve and protect the needs of the innocent.

There are a number of programs the Catholic Church has implemented as a result of its mishandling of allegations of sexual abuse, which other organizations would benefit from emulating. First and foremost was the creation of an infrastructure aimed at creating safe environments and a culture of safety within the Church. Secondly, acknowledging and apologizing for the grave sin and crime of sexual abuse— over and over again. The Church also established a comprehensive program that provides to victims a support system including Victim Assistance Coordinators and an annual audit of all Dioceses with regard to their compliance with the *Charter*. Another example that should be adopted by any organization that provides services for youth: background checks and safe environment training for children on how to protect themselves from abuse and how to report such actions. To date, the Church has conducted 2.4 million background checks as required by Article 13 of the *Charter* and has trained more than 4.26 million children on how to detect and report abuse and trained nearly 2.38 million adults on proper interaction with children. There now even exists a screening process prior to an individuals' admission to the seminary to prevent future incidents.

As Chair of the National Review Board, a lay-based group of individuals established by the *Charter* to advise the bishops on how to prevent and respond to sexual abuse of minors and assesses their compliance in the implementation of the *Charter* through an annual audit, I have seen first-hand the effective reforms that emerged from the pain of the past. These reforms could undoubtedly discourage abuse in other areas of society.

Sexual abuse does not discriminate and, as learned from the despicable acts of Harvey Weinstein and Larry Nassar, can impact anyone, male or female, young or old.

Many have, and will continue, to focus upon the Catholic Church's shortcomings with regard to its initial response to the sexual abuse crisis. However, those with an earnest desire to address the problem of sexual abuse and assault at its core should instead focus upon and learn from the reforms that were implemented. Regardless of one's opinion with regard to the Catholic Church relative to the sexual abuse crisis, the Church has taken a leadership role in addressing this issue and today serves as a model for other organizations to emulate.

Francesco C. Cesareo, Ph.D., is president of Assumption College and chairman of the National Review Board of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.