



**Catholic Committee of Appalachia**  
**STATEMENT ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**  
**IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

November 20, 2017

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA) prides itself on raising a prophetic voice of justice. Yet it has taken us this long to tackle the topic of child abuse, particularly sexual abuse by clerics and religious in the Roman Catholic Church and its cover up by their bishops and superiors. For most people, the mere thought of the scandal conjures such a wave of upsetting emotions that it becomes difficult to discuss. For those who are accused, and for the hierarchy grappling with the scandal, there are even more emotions. For survivors, there are many more, and they are exponentially intensified. In addition, we can all be reduced to silence by the fear the church elicits with its global patriarchal power structure. We are intimidated by its clericalism, historical authority, spiritual influence, and real or perceived threats of the loss of financial support, or expulsion from the community, if we dare to speak hard truths. But, by remembering who we are, the People of God together can change that.

As Christians, we are called to protect the most vulnerable. Thus, we take on the responsibility never to expect them to have to speak up for themselves or to seek justice on their own. It is against our morals and best interests as one Church to leave those who have been so crushed to defend and heal themselves and each other, if they have the wherewithal to do so at all.

Therefore, CCA joins survivors of sex abuse all over the world in mourning the recent loss of their fearless champion, Barbara Blaine, an unrelenting advocate as the founder and past president of Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) and a victim of abuse herself. Having unexpectedly lost this giant voice in the movement, CCA celebrates Barbara's life and heroic works, and we are reminded once again that *silence crucifies* as much as abuse does. It is in Barbara's memory that we pick up her torch and finally speak.

Just as we recognize the importance of annually remembering the gruesome details of Jesus' Passion, the same is true of listening to the stories of those who have been sexually abused. Their personal accounts utterly stun us back into the reality of their brutal suffering. We must continue to go through the cycle of grief and pain with them until it brings all of us to healing. More often, though, we Catholics tend to avoid the disturbing details of the single most heinous ongoing issue of injustice in our faith tradition. Doing so allows us to numb our distress over the topic and rationalize our identification with a faith tradition that perpetuates abuse. It is a literal turning of our backs to the crucified. There is nothing more broken in the body of Christ than a sexually violated child, shattered by the hands of a highly respected and implicitly trusted religious figure. Therefore, we listen to their experiences no matter how sickened we may be by their stark tellings.

The number of crucified bodies is staggering. As many as 100,000 children have been abused by priests in the U.S. alone.<sup>1</sup> Ordained men have raped our altar boys face down in the confessional, and in the sacristy

before Mass. They have fondled our little girls in their own beds as they tucked them in at night. They have sodomized our high school teens after getting them drunk. They have impregnated divorcees who came to them seeking spiritual healing, and they have pressured seminarians into non-consensual oral sex in the back of the classroom. Similar examples exist among deacons, brothers and nuns who have abused, too.<sup>2</sup>

Many victims who have not killed themselves due to the shame, loss of faith, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder are no longer truly living either, but merely surviving, attempting to cope and heal any way they can. As Ms. Blaine said in interviews, she underestimated the length of the healing process, expecting SNAP would be necessary no more than a year. “Now I understand it’s a lifelong process. I thought it was something you heal from like a broken leg. I never realized it would take so long.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the stamping out of clerical sexual misdeeds well known by the public and secular law enforcement has been a disturbing and nearly lifelong process for our 2,000 year old Church. Records show that, throughout history, church leaders have regularly written disciplinary legislation against clerical abuse beginning with the Council of Elvira in Spain in 306 A.D. They have also tried abusers in church tribunals and, at times, allowed secular authorities to punish the accused. Yet, clear attempts to hide these actions only began in 1922 through papal laws with strict confidentiality codes, which were compounded in 1962 by Pope John XXIII’s decree to maintain “Pontifical Secrecy” —total and perpetual secrecy.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the silence remained throughout contemporary history until the first major civil case of sexual abuse by a priest was reported by the secular media in 1985.<sup>5</sup> And news of the rampant abuse and routine cover up by bishops worldwide only began to break *again* once the *Boston Globe* revealed its city’s pervasive scandal in 2002.<sup>6</sup> Up to that point, it was common for bishops to deny allegations, intimidate, lie to, or pay off victims, and send abusive priests to counseling.<sup>7</sup> Today, psychologists and psychiatrists use a combination of methods to treat clients who have abused, but until the early 1980s they understood cognitive behavior therapy alone to be rehabilitative.<sup>8</sup> Prior to adding relapse prevention treatment, which was just emerging at that time, once priests were cleared by their counselors, it was accepted practice for bishops to reappoint them, and authorities were not notified.<sup>9</sup> In the two decades since the *Globe*’s article exposed the bishops’ criminal endangerment, our leadership has rarely publicly apologized or begged forgiveness. Regardless, their sincerity is in doubt when they still prioritize the protection of the church’s assets and power base over admitting clerical abuse and the bishops’ failure to report it. Sadly, the same can be said for men’s and women’s religious communities.

Eradicating the propensity some clerics have to sexually abuse may be impossible given that a small percentage of the world’s population has had the trait seemingly for time immemorial, but breaking the code of Pontifical Secrecy from the last 55 years should not be as difficult. Yet, despite the hundreds of millions of dollars the church spends annually offering treatment for abusive priests, counseling for survivors, and Safe Environment trainings in parishes, and no matter how successful these programs may be,<sup>10</sup> we fail to address the root issue if our bishops do not hold themselves and their priests accountable. It is simply astounding that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops felt it necessary to allow

vigorous debate against a “zero tolerance” policy for bishops neglecting to respond to allegations, before it was finally adopted into the 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (the “Dallas Charter”).<sup>11</sup> Now, after 15 years, in the midst of allegations around Cardinal George Pell, the Australian Royal Commission “recommended that the failure to report sexual abuse, even in religious confessions, be made a ‘criminal offense.’ The suggestion was met with harsh opposition by church leaders, who called the decision a ‘government intrusion’ into the spiritual realm, which until now has been respected and upheld.”<sup>12</sup>

It is unacceptable that our church leaders still cannot be trusted to provide safety for our children. Yet, we simply do not have faith that bishops or the leadership of religious communities will alert law enforcement officials, nor can we assume that “zero tolerance” policies will be enforced. And when church leaders point to secular institutions for having just as serious an abuse epidemic as the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>13</sup> they engage in an immature, ineffective shifting of blame. We share the frustration of survivors who insist over and over that the Church’s attempts to rectify matters are not enough and dangerously too slow due to constant obstruction. Marie Collins, an Irish laywoman and abuse survivor, resigned last year from the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors for these very reasons.<sup>14</sup> It is unconscionable that it took the Vatican until 2016 to realize, at the Commission’s recommendation, that it should be a priority to train new bishops on how to prevent sexual abuse. And since training has been mandated for everyone else working with children or vulnerable adults since 2002, it is an insult. “In terms of implementation [for bishops], it remains to be seen,” commission member Krysten Winter-Green said in an interview.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Collins said recently that the Pell case has shown “how little reliance we can put on assurances from the Catholic Church that bishops and religious superiors will face sanctions if they mishandle abuse cases.”<sup>16</sup>

We are appalled that 34 *bishops* have been accused of sexual misconduct in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Renowned psychotherapist Richard Sipe<sup>18</sup> estimates that 9% of all U.S. priests have offended. This is almost 10,000 priests.<sup>19</sup> According to a breakdown of all diocesan cases in the U.S., within the Appalachian region, 450 priests and religious, and two bishops, have been accused of sexual misconduct. Of the priests and religious, only a handful of them were found not-guilty or to have unsubstantiated cases. The list of end results for the majority of alleged perpetrators includes transfer or removal from ministry, resignation, retirement, or suicide. Those convicted who have not died awaiting trial have been laicized and have served or are currently serving time,<sup>20</sup> while most cases settled out of court add to the Church’s nearly \$4 billion of total pay-outs and court costs to date.<sup>21</sup> As for Appalachian bishops, the Diocese of Lexington’s Bishop James Williams resigned at the age of 65 after allegations in 2002.<sup>22</sup> Many questions remain in the case of current Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Bishop Michael Bransfield, with a reopened 2012 investigation seemingly still pending or derailed.<sup>23</sup> Despite Bransfield’s denial of ever having abused anyone,<sup>24</sup> with a rate as low as 1.5% of allegations in the U.S. appearing to be false,<sup>25</sup> the people need definitive answers and closure to this case by civil authorities, or public transparency for why it has been left hanging so long.<sup>26</sup>

Nationally, it is estimated that 25% of girls and 16% of boys experience sexual abuse before they are 18 years old. Over 90,000 cases are reported annually but the actual number is much higher,<sup>27</sup> since it is

understood that about two-thirds of incidences go unreported.<sup>28</sup> Certain home environment factors contribute significantly to children being at a greater risk of sexual abuse. In Appalachia, we have high numbers of children who receive foster care, who live in poverty, and who live with unemployed parents, single parents, or with the partners of single parents. These situations make our children up to twenty times more vulnerable.<sup>29</sup> In a recent study of child sexual abuse in rural areas, it was found that two-thirds of the alleged abusers were family members. Drugs or alcohol were used by the majority of abusers unrelated to their victims. And recanting took place most often when the accused was a boyfriend/girlfriend of the victim's caregiver, or a prominent person in the small community.<sup>30</sup> As only 6% of Appalachians identify as Catholic, with the church so embroiled in its own sex abuse scandal, it is unlikely that our faith tradition will be any kind of beacon in the darkness for Appalachia on this issue.

Regrettably, this scandal is only one of many serious, intersecting issues we face with church leadership. A complex combination of causes has left the Catholic hierarchy in a deeply troubling state with a damaged reputation, a lack of moral authority, fewer priests in circulation, and a primary concern with protecting their own interests. Despite the church's desperate need for healing and Pope Francis' valiant efforts to change clerical *culture*, we cannot expect any lasting systemic changes to come from the top so long as Francis chooses to reiterate previous popes' declarations that the Church will not reform its clerical *structure* in any meaningful way.

We must wake up to the dark realities of sexual abuse and clericalism in our church as they have been revealed throughout history. Beyond perpetrating, ignoring, and denying child sexual abuse, our clerics can often malign those on the margins of society in other ways, as well. The power of the Roman collar in the Catholic Church has enabled and reinforced patterns of misogyny, white supremacy, discrimination, condescension, homophobia, pastoral negligence, and the maintenance of silence on any of these and other issues. However, the violation and exploitation of defenseless children as an expression of sexual and spiritual domination is the most intimate, raw, and vile example of the abuse of sacred trust and priestly powers.

All this stands in direct opposition to the teachings of our faith tradition. For the single largest religious group in the United States, and the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world, these behaviors from our leaders should be intolerable. Feigning contentedness is giving our approval. We can struggle with perhaps unanswerable questions as to why atrocities like these happen. We can analyze and theorize how our Church got to be in such a state, or we can leave our beloved community in search of another faith tradition. Instead, as Barbara Blaine did, we choose to remember who we are as People of God and make changes that begin with ourselves. We call on our fellow Catholics, now, to do likewise. The duty to force real transformation is a God-given *opportunity* which remains in the hands of each of us at the grassroots. Our Church's hierarchical system only has as much power as we give it. To avoid giving away our power, we must end the tendency to indiscriminately hold ordained and avowed religious in high or infallible esteem, and limit our expectations of them in the realm of pastoral services. Otherwise, we are not recognizing the broken humanity they share with the rest of us. We must minister more intentionally to each other, and practice mutual aid with our religious leaders. Keeping our power would cause a

colossal paradigm shift in church structure since we would finally be fully embracing our baptismal authority and leading the way in becoming the Church we want to see in the world.

We must continue to mercifully hospice out the old clerical structure and usher in the new. When we do not resist and start to change systemic injustice in our church, we perpetuate it with our silence. It is not enough to simply say in response to the stories of people who struggle, “I believe you; I’m sorry.” Each one of us must be willing to amplify their voices, or speak for them when they cannot, using whatever privilege we have—be it gender, race, social or economic status, or health—to liberate them. We are the only ones who can begin loosening the bonds of injustice for each other; only we can untie our wounded siblings and children in Christ.

There are those good and faithful priests and bishops who admit to being entrenched in a corrupt system, but who remain publicly silent, likely for many of the same reasons and fears experienced by the laity. We call them now to join their voices with ours. They must speak out explicitly—from the pulpit, with their public presence in the streets, in their accompaniment of the abused and oppressed, and through their own personal conduct and any policies they can affect—and be assured they have of our full support. We are proud and grateful for the few who call the church and society to task, because they resist complicity in a culture of secrecy with a code of silence, and refuse to be part of concentrated abusive power.

Although our women’s religious communities and the Leadership of Catholic Women Religious (LCWR) as a whole have recently gone through devastating trials with investigation by the Vatican, we pray they can muster the same courage and grace they have shown, to open themselves to the painful stories of those who have survived sexual abuse by sisters. We stand with those survivors who, for the past 15 years, have been calling women religious to be more proactive in ending abuse by sisters and nuns, and revealing instances where abuse has been covered up by superiors.<sup>31</sup> We envision a time when survivors will enjoy as much overwhelming global support as the sisters have, so their journeys of healing can begin and no future abuse by sisters will occur.

Finally, we pray for the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual healing of all children and vulnerable adults who have been abused or oppressed by the Church *in any way*, particularly in Appalachia. We recommit to strengthened efforts to ensure their security, heightened vigilance for signs of violation, and a communal pledge to report any findings to proper authorities. Rather than demonize and ostracize those among us who have been accused and convicted, especially for crimes of sexual misconduct, we commit to practices of mercy, forgiveness, and inclusion. We vow to protect their dignity in ways that simultaneously promote their healing and the safety of survivors and potential victims. We pray for the longevity and wisdom needed for the Holy Father to resolve the abuse of clerical power and to bring unity and diversity to our leadership. And we call those bishops and cardinals who continue to conceal knowledge of sexual abuse to come to justice, rather than having to be brought to it. We work to widen our circle of compassion to include the hierarchy, for the oneness of the People of God is not complete without them.

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMW3WfyBP5A>
  - <sup>2</sup> Personal accounts from survivors shared in news articles, documentaries, SNAP support groups, personal conversations with the author, between 1992 and 2013
  - <sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/barbara-blaine-advocate-for-victims-of-sex-abuse-by-catholic-clergy-dies-at-61/2017/09/25/534343da-a1fc-11e7-ade1-76d061d56efa\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c28af5b32d5b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/barbara-blaine-advocate-for-victims-of-sex-abuse-by-catholic-clergy-dies-at-61/2017/09/25/534343da-a1fc-11e7-ade1-76d061d56efa_story.html?utm_term=.c28af5b32d5b)
  - <sup>4</sup> <http://www.crusadeagainstclergyabuse.com/htm/AShortHistory.htm>
  - <sup>5</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/20/us/sex-charges-against-priest-embroil-louisiana-parents.html>
  - <sup>6</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTlrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html>
  - <sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Jay\\_Report](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jay_Report)
  - <sup>8</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277972100\\_Historical\\_developments\\_in\\_sex\\_offender\\_treatment](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277972100_Historical_developments_in_sex_offender_treatment)
  - <sup>9</sup> <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/243738-3-john-jay-report-1.html>
  - <sup>10</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/2016-Annual-Report.pdf> p. 64
  - <sup>11</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/video/?170554-1/catholic-bishops-conference-day-2>
  - <sup>12</sup> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/australian-bishops-meet-in-rome-as-church-reels-from-recent-crisis-71749>
  - <sup>13</sup> <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/fostering-safe-environments>
  - <sup>14</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/exclusive-survivor-explains-decision-leave-vaticans-abuse-commission>
  - <sup>15</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/vatican-will-train-new-bishops-on-sex-abuse-awareness/>
  - <sup>16</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/29/world/pope-francis-catholic-church-sexual-abuse/index.html>
  - <sup>17</sup> [http://www.bishop-accountability.org/bishops/accused/global\\_list\\_of\\_accused\\_bishops.htm](http://www.bishop-accountability.org/bishops/accused/global_list_of_accused_bishops.htm)
  - <sup>18</sup> [http://www.snapnetwork.org/rlh\\_richard\\_sipe](http://www.snapnetwork.org/rlh_richard_sipe)
  - <sup>19</sup> <http://www.bishop-accountability.org/AtAGlance/data.htm>
  - <sup>20</sup> <http://bishop-accountability.org/priestdb/PriestDBbydiocese.html>
  - <sup>21</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/ncr-research-costs-sex-abuse-crisis-us-church-underestimated>
  - <sup>22</sup> [http://www.bishop-accountability.org/bishops/accused/global\\_list\\_of\\_accused\\_bishops.htm](http://www.bishop-accountability.org/bishops/accused/global_list_of_accused_bishops.htm)
  - <sup>23</sup> <http://clericalwhispers.blogspot.com/2012/07/montco-reviewing-case-against-cleric.html>
  - <sup>24</sup> <https://dwc.org/a-statement-from-bishop-michael-j-bransfield/3/>
  - <sup>25</sup> <http://www.educatetoeliminate.com/blog/2017/7/10/false-accusations-the-myth-that-perpetuates-child-abuse>
  - <sup>26</sup> As of this writing, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has not responded to CCA's request for clarifying information.
  - <sup>27</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/facts-about-child-sexual-abuse-statistics-3533871>
  - <sup>28</sup> [https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all\\_statistics\\_20150619.pdf](https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all_statistics_20150619.pdf)
  - <sup>29</sup> <http://www.cachouston.org/child-sexual-abuse-facts/>
  - <sup>30</sup> [https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/article\\_3393ce2bf16116603abcacff0000bee5e7.pdf?sfvrsn=dd84b2c\\_4](https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/article_3393ce2bf16116603abcacff0000bee5e7.pdf?sfvrsn=dd84b2c_4)
  - <sup>31</sup> [http://www.snapnetwork.org/nun\\_abuse](http://www.snapnetwork.org/nun_abuse)