

## MENTARY

# Church has a big credibility gap on problem of priestly pedophilia

You can't pick up a newspaper these days without reading a story about another case of either alleged or confirmed "priestly pedophilia." Hundreds of adults are coming forward to say they were molested as teenagers by their friendly parish priest. The worst part is that we've only seen the tip of the iceberg. Most of the victims of this sick and immoral act remain silent — unwilling or incapable of going public and reliving the horror.



**STEVE ADUBATO**

As a Catholic and former alter boy who attended Catholic grammar school, high school and college, I find the topic of certain clerics engaging in an unholy alliance with impressionable and often intimidated teenagers is not new. There were stories and rumors about "priests you should stay away from" as far back as I can remember.

One of them was a Father G., a prominent local priest who supervised the alter boys at a local parish. I remember the story one of my best friends (who served Mass with Father G.) told me about the priest's habit of pulling down the alter boys' pants and spanking them as punishment for being late. Sound odd?

That was only the beginning for the good father, who spent 15 years taking full advantage of being in the most private of circumstances with his young charges (one story was that Father G. would take alter boys on trips to his parents' home in the country, get naked and request that the youngsters paint his private parts) until one kid finally told his parents and the thing exploded.

Other kids told their stories. Charges were filed. A court case ensued. A guilty verdict was reached. Father G. finally got nailed, but not before dozens, if not hundreds, of young boys would suffer.

Despite all the gossip and the stories about Father G., this stuff was never anything to be discussed in public. Most kids were scared to death to tell their parents (much less church leaders).

I have a hard time believing that those who could have done something about it had no clue that something was going on with Father G.

It is only now, after several highly publicized and sensational charges, cases and convictions involving priests molesting children (mostly

boys), that the Catholic hierarchy is beginning to act. But despite all the rhetoric from the church that it will not tolerate such behavior in its ranks, there is good reason to question if it can be trusted any longer on this issue.

The church's credibility gap on the pedophilia problem is too wide and its failures so great that the New Jersey Catholic Conference's newly proposed guidelines to deal with priestly pedophilia may not cut it. This may be a classic case of too little, much too late.

Archbishops, cardinals and now the pope are tripping over themselves to assure those concerned (especially disillusioned Catholics) that steps are being taken to deal with this problem. Revised guidelines and new screening procedures for priests are now the rage. The church's top brass have had enough of the negative publicity and million-dollar settlements. Their motives are suspect, to say the least.

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According to Father Andrew Greeley, one of the few Catholic priests to speak out on this issue before this past year, "If Catholic clerics feel that charges of pedophilia have created an open season on them, they have only themselves to blame. By their own inaction and indifference, they have created an open season on children for the few sexual predators among them."

Father Greeley made that bold statement in an op-ed piece in the New York Times in March of 1992. The worst accusation in Greeley's commentary was his conclusion that those responsible for handling pedophilia cases had no reservation in reassigning, after a few months of treatment, clerics who have faced such accusations — sometimes to the role of pastor.

This is a complex and messy problem. Unfortunately a lot of decent and caring clergymen are going to be tarnished by all this. Many parents are now fearful and in some cases refusing to leave their children alone with priests. It's sad.

One of the only hopes the church has of restoring any semblance of credibility on this issue is to first admit the extent of the problem and how poorly they have handled it; and second, appoint an independent investigative panel with a majority of lay members to review any allegation of sexual abuse of a child by a priest. This alone won't solve the problem, but will be a meaningful first step in demonstrating that church leaders are finally ready to purge themselves of this shameful pedophilia problem.

*(Steve Aduabato is a television commentator, Rutgers University lecturer, and a former state legislator.)*