



The Challenge of Child Protection

It only took an instant, he told me thirty years later. In his sixteenth year, Bob's world turned upside down.

Growing up in a Catholic home where the parish priest was a familiar guest at the family table, he absorbed his parents' admiration for their charismatic pastor, whose fund-raising skills and organizational prowess kept their huge California parish humming with activity. Bob and his friends could often be found on the parish grounds working on some project Father had asked them to do. It was the early 1960s.

One afternoon, standing in the kitchen of the rectory with the pastor, Bob was astounded to see the priest make a sexually suggestive gesture to him. The next moment another priest walked in, and nothing more came of the pastor's alarming advance.

But Bob left the rectory forever changed. He had seen with his own eyes that this major figure in his life was not the man everyone thought him to be. Underneath the sure-footed, successful exterior lurked some darkly menacing inner man Bob never wanted to get close to again.

Being solicited to sin by a priest shook Bob's faith to the core, but he had no one to turn to for help. In the early 1960s public awareness of sexual abuse of minors was still thirty years in the future, and for young men reeling with confusion in the wake of such a sudden and shocking surprise no guidance was at hand.

Though Bob had done nothing wrong, he felt alone and ashamed and wanted no one to know why. Then he learned that his pastor had made similar advances to some of his friends. But aside from them who else would believe what he had seen? He had no witness and no evidence to back up his story. If he told it to anyone, it would be his word against Father's; and Father could explain Bob's story away by saying he took a priest's harmless glance to be something it wasn't. Knowing the reverence in which his parents held their pastor, Bob had to think they would likely prefer the priest's alternative explanation to his own if ever he could muster the courage to bring the darkness to light. So would a teacher, another priest, a newspaper reporter, on hearing testimony only his friends could corroborate. And they were all bound by the same strictures of secrecy as he.

So Bob and his friends and thousands like them buried the tragedy of priestly sexual abuse for decades, powerless to break out of its deafening hold.

Then, with the dawning of a new century, explosive press coverage burst the dam of

secrecy and unlocked the prison cells of silence. For the first time victims had a way to give voice to the soul-searing betrayal men they had trusted put them through. At last Bob and his friends could begin to heal the scarred memories that had cruelly misconfigured their lives.

In the past twenty years we have learned that the prospect of public disclosure is the single most effective deterrent to the sexual abuse of children and youth. This is why throughout the country, from the parish level up, the Church has sought to create an environment that is unfriendly to abusers because it is friendly to disclosure of the dark secrets that Bob and his friends had to carry alone.

With each passing year reports of child abuse in the Church have decreased. We can preserve this great gain in protective awareness only if we maintain the vigilance that brought it about.