

Conversation with Bishop Gregory Aymond at Georgetown University, March 20, 2007

Most people start their speeches with a disclaimer, so I'm going to do two at the beginning of this one. This evening I'm representing myself. I serve as chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, but what I will be sharing with you this evening are personal reflections about what we have experienced in the church, not as a representative of the Committee or of the U.S. bishops' conference.

We know that famous question, "where were you when" some event happened -- when JFK was shot, or Watergate, or the space shuttle exploded. This evening, I ask us the question, do we remember where we were and some of the images that you and I saw on television or in reality in the first six months of 2002? Day after day and night after night we heard on television and saw in the newspapers article after article about the sexual abuse by clergy and then reactions by dioceses. As I was reading these stories, and seeing them in the media, what always came to mind was, and still is, What about those who are the victims of abuse? It's hard enough for us who have not been victimized by sexual abuse to see it and to hear about it. But what kind of wounds and pain and brokenness does it bring to those who have been abused? They see it and hear it in a much different way than those who have not.

In the first half of 2002, it got worse night after night after night: one painful, negative, tragic story after another. This went on for six months. Some would say this paved the way to our bishops' meeting in Dallas. I would like to say it another way. Those six months "pained" the way to Dallas.

The bishops gathered to discuss this tragedy, and then in the midst of that meeting in Texas developed the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

In the last few months, I have received many, many invitations for comments and interviews on what has happened in the last five years. Inevitably the question is, Could you please comment on this fifth anniversary of the charter?

I don't know about your definition of "anniversary," but in my dictionary, it suggests memories of a happy, joy-filled event. For none of us Catholics in the United States, could we say that June of 2002 and the months leading up to it were happy events.

How would I describe them personally? From the stories I have heard and from the abuse victims with whom I have met and spoken? It was a time of great pain, certainly a time of embarrassment, and a brokenness of spirit. Some of the leaders of the Church, the clergy, the people into whom we had put so much faith and belief ... no matter how you say it, they let us down.

Why was it painful? It was story after story of an innocent child made a victim. A shattered life, a child, very young or not so young, whose faith was affected and shattered. As we know with sexual abuse, it's not just the person abused, but it's their family and many others around them who bear the wounds, the hurts, and the pains.

It was a time of pain for many of us because as we looked at our brother priests, we felt a sense of betrayal. These were trusted colleagues with whom we had worked, gone to the seminary, and been stationed. And we asked the question, how can this be? I did not know that he was so troubled or sick. The signs were not there, or, the signs were there, and why didn't we act more quickly? Why didn't we put some of this together?

It was painful because for so many of us -- clergy, religious and laity -- we saw a reality, the reality of sexual abuse in the Church, that was much greater than we had expected to find. It was also painful because bishops lost credibility because of their actions or their lack of actions.

We knew, as we knew in families, and in our society, that there was sexual abuse. We had heard a story or two here and there about it in the Church, but in 2002 it became a reality that we could not in any way dismiss.

It was also painful because, I dare say, that for each one of us here tonight, we had that painful desire to literally hold and to comfort the abused and their families, to hold them and to comfort them physically, emotionally and spiritually.

It was painful because we were put in the position of having to defend good priests who were bearing the burden of the scandal and some of whom were ashamed to wear the sign of their ordination.

It was painful because you and I had anger toward bishops and priests and deacons who were the root causes of the abuse. And for those who had been abused, the wounds opened over and over and over again. As Father Tom Reese said, it certainly has been a time we will never forget, the most painful time in the history of the Catholic Church in this country.

My sisters and brothers, I suggest to you tonight that five years later, this is not at all an anniversary. It is a commemoration, because in it people were hurt and there was pain.

This evening with you, I would like to ask three questions. In the last five years, as a Church and as a society, what have we learned? Secondly, what have we done? Thirdly, what are our challenges, because we know there is still much to do.

What have we learned? May I suggest that there are six major lessons.

- First, June of 2002 was our 9/11. It was a time of terror; it was a wake up call that sexual abuse was certainly a reality in our American society that was not much talked about at that time. But all of a sudden it was within our family, the Church. And we learned not just that it was present, but we learned the depth of it and the pain that so many people had experienced.
- We learned of the errors that Church leaders made in dealing with these very delicate, sensitive situations. We have learned that in some areas of our Church we did not have what we would call a safe environment. That's become a very popular phrase nowadays, and it should be. We should have safe environments, environments for children and for all vulnerable people where they are respected. We learned that in some parishes, and

rectories, and schools, we did not have safe environments; we also did not have “faith environments.”

I would like to think that as a Church, we don't want just a safe environment, but an environment that truly reaches out with the heart of Jesus, as He said to the children, “come to me.” We realized that many, many people had not found a place of welcome or love. Maybe it looked like that on the surface, but in the abuse, people were pained by manipulation, sin, and suspicion.

- Thirdly, we learned not a new face, but a different kind of face that we call sin. We saw it. Some saw it in the reality of their lives. The rest of us saw it on television or we heard people talking about their abuse. We saw and experienced the sin, the infidelity, the brokenness of individual clergy. But we also saw a sin in the weakness of the church leadership, in the way in which some of these situations were addressed or not addressed.

We also learned, painfully so, that very often rehabilitation of a sex offender may not be possible. At least for some, it's not. And treatment, we found out the hard way, was often not effective. In the midst of that, John Paul II said bluntly, that there is no place in the priesthood for those who would abuse a child or a young person. He called a sin a sin. Yes, God is the God of forgiveness, but when we lose the trust of those whom we are called to serve and to lead in the name of Christ and the Church, such a person should not be in a leadership position as a priest or a bishop or a deacon.

We as leaders of the Church must sincerely apologize, even if we were not directly involved, because it's happened in this family that we belong to and that we call “church.”

- Fourthly, we learned a great deal from the John Jay College of Criminology and from CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. They helped us to look beyond the actual situation and to ask some very important sociological, psychological and philosophical questions.

They helped us put numbers to the story. There's always a terrible human danger when we deal with numbers that we forget the individual and what they have been through. For each and every person I have spoken with and walked with who has been a victim of sexual abuse, I have never, ever found two stories that are the same, or two hearts that are broken in the same way, or two pasts that have been shattered and the futures affected in the same way.

So in dealing with numbers and statistics, we could easily get lost in that and forget the individuals. I don't want to do that. At the same time, the numbers from John Jay College and CARA do provide for us a perspective. I would like to share with you some numbers, but I would like to say first -- and this is more important than the numbers that I will share with you -- one incident of sexual abuse by a Church leader is one too many.

From 1950 to 2002, the number of priests, diocesan priests and religious who served in the United States was 109,694. During that same period, we found out in 2002 that 4,392 of them had been accused of sexual abuse. One incident of sexual abuse by a Church leader is one too many, but we also want to acknowledge that it was a little less than four percent of the clergy

during that period of time who were involved. No excuse. Statistics, though, do bring us to a level of reality.

Of those who had been accused, 56 percent of them had one allegation; 27 percent had two to three allegations. And this part is frightening: 149 of that 4,392 had 10 or more victims. This is a small number responsible for a substantial number of allegations. That doesn't excuse it. It only gives us a perspective.

- Fifth, we learned that the majority of cases of sexual abuse by clergy – bishops, priests and deacons -- occurred in the 1970s. The majority of those who were involved in sexual abuse as clergy were ordained between 1950 and 1979. This causes us to ask a very, very important question: why? This is what John Jay College is still helping us to try to answer. What was going on in the Church? What was going on in society? What was the morality of society at that time? Was there something going on in priestly formation that was causing this to happen at a certain time? No excuse, but those all become contributing factors. The research on this is not yet finished.

The fact that fewer cases have been reported in recent years is, we believe, a sign of hope. We are teaching boundaries. We are using modern psychological evaluations and a great attentiveness to this, both with our priests and with seminarians. But why did this phenomenon take place in the 1970s of those ordained between 1950 and 1979? We can't let go of that question, and it's not fully answered.

- Sixth, we have learned from psychology that people often abuse when they are under stress, when they have poor support systems, when their personal inhibitions are lowered, when they are involved in drugs or alcohol. Not excuses, but that's reality. One of the things that we have to look at as brother priests and bishops, especially when we examine the cases of priests who have abused one to three victims, is that the research shows that these factors were present. It raises an important question. Do we look out and care for our brother priests and brother bishops? What about the lone ranger who no one knows what he's doing in his hidden life? We cannot allow that. The Church cannot tolerate that. We need to shepherd the shepherds in their spiritual and emotional health.

My sisters and brothers, we have learned much. We have done a lot, and there's still a lot more to do. What must we continue to do? As a Church, we must continue to implement the charter, which calls us to integrity, to transparency, to fidelity. We must continue to have regular audits within our dioceses, true accountability, true transparency. We must continue to dialogue very honestly with the National Review Board. The National Review Board has been an asset to our work and we have a very good relationship with the members of the board.

What must we do? Once again, this was somewhat accidental, but there are six points that I'm going to cover here, too. I'm not into sixes; it just happened this way. What must we do today, tomorrow, and for decades to come?

- First, we must continue to find those who have been the victims of sexual abuse. And when we find them, we must offer them an apology, and healing, and counsel. They

deserve healing. We know what God was doing when they were being abused. God cried because in God's heart sexual abuse can never be justified. God would want us to be for them his healing power. So we must reach out and provide, to the best of our ability, true, genuine healing.

- Secondly, we must continue the education of our bishops, priests and deacons regarding boundaries in healthy, celibate, and chaste lives.
- Thirdly, we must continue to focus our attention on the importance of seminary life and priestly formation. We must be vigilant. We must do everything possible to prepare men today in the seminary, the young and the not-so-young, to know themselves spiritually, psychologically and sexually. We, as their formators, must make sure that, if there are any signs that may be suggestive of sexual abuse, they do not have a right to the priesthood. The unfortunate difficulty, psychology tells us, is that sometimes we only see the signs when it's too late. No excuse. We must continue to be vigilant.
- Fourthly, we must create in our Church – in our parishes and missions, and wherever we find the people of God -- not just safe environments. We would hope that there is a safe environment in every youth group and in every organization in our country. But we want environments of faith, where people can trust one another and their leaders, the clergy.
- Fifth, we must continue to educate about safe environment and faith environment to our bishops, priests, deacons, religious, volunteers, and people in lay ministry. We cannot accept mediocrity in safe environment programs and faith environment programs. Sometimes it is very difficult and even disheartening when we hear people who don't understand this arguing, Why do we have all these programs that we have to tell young kids about boundaries? Mediocrity in this is simply not acceptable.
- Sixth, as a Church, who has sinned and failed, through our repentance and our purification, we want to be able to say to families, schools, youth groups, and those involved in youth recreation, that we have been through the pain of sexual abuse. Through our pain, and through our repentance and our conversion, we believe that we have something to share that will prevent not just sexual abuse in the Church, but in families, schools, and other organizations that serve young people. We believe that in some way we can be used by God to give life and wisdom to others and to perhaps save others from the hurt that somehow we allowed in the past.

There are at least three challenges that I think we face, challenges that we embrace as a Church, challenges around which there is much discussion, at least in some circles.

One of the challenges that our committee faces, which has been discussed in the media frequently, is a national database of clergy accused of sexual abuse.

I would like to give one perspective on that position. I believe that if we did that, there would be very little chance that that list would be comprehensive or accurate. Some of those people are dead. Some have left ministry. Some we have no idea where they are. I would have a great concern for the miscarriage of justice and the ruination of good reputations.

I believe that this is best decided on an individual basis by the diocesan bishop, in consultation with the diocesan review board. One size does not fit all, and I think we have to be very careful. That is my opinion, and I humbly submit it to you.

The second challenge that I think faces us is a very, very important question of faith. What does God want? What does God want of his Church today in the United States? How is he calling us to continue to go through a conversion that will lead the Church to faith environments, to new life, to the healing of victims? We really do need prayer and penance. And especially for those of us who have in some way been involved as leaders, we must be asking the all-important question: God, how do you want to use us in this time to purify your Church and to restore trust?

I must say that my image of ministry has changed in this five-year period. I have many images of the Church and of ministry and of serving as a leader, shepherd, a bishop. One of my images was that beautiful image that Jesus gives of the vine and the branches, and cutting the vine, and making sure that it's growing right. And that's all good and well, but in the last five years, my image has changed.

Perhaps we live in a time of carefully trimming the vine and planting new seeds for growth that will bring us healing and restored trust. New seeds are usually planted with the pain and the hurt of human beings. Just as Jesus died and was buried, so, too, His Church today must die and be buried in order to rise to new life.

Thirdly, I do believe that we as a Church are wounded and sinful -- and also filled with God's Spirit. That's the mystery of the Church. We have something to teach society. We cannot keep our heads in the sand, and we cannot allow society to keep their heads in the sand. We as a Church must not only make up for our wrongdoing, but we must help to change this society in this country, and we can by doing our best to protect our children, so that sexual abuse will never happen again.

Someday I think someone is going to thank God that the Church repented and purified itself, because it also helped to change society. It's already begun to happen. Now in public schools, and in youth groups, and where I come from, just this month the Texas Youth Commission, which serves young people in the criminal system, they're talking about sexual abuse. Our sin, our failure, has raised this to another level that can protect others in our society.

In closing, I would like to offer heartfelt, sincere thanks to the individuals and the groups who have called us as a church to integrity and to this repentance and purification. Thank you. What you have done has caused us pain and caused us to recognize brokenness. But thank you for calling us to integrity and repentance.

I want to thank those of you who have worked very hard in praying for and caring for victims and their families. God has used you as an instrument of healing.

I want to give thanks and admiration to those priests, thousands and thousands of them, who have been affected by this, who have been misjudged because of the actions of their brothers. They are faithful priests, and we have lots of them. We can't forget them. They need your love and support and your prayers, maybe more than ever before.

I also want to thank the diocesan safe environment coordinators, the diocesan victims assistance directors, and the National Review Board, with whom we work very, very closely. Thanks to our

own staff at the bishops' conference, the director of our Office for Child and Youth Protection, Teresa Kettelkamp and her deputy Sheila Kelly, and those who work with them.

Also I want to thank the laity, the parents, the volunteers who undergo background checks and training. It's become a part of our life, and it should be. What I hear very often as I move around the Austin Diocese, in Texas, from adults and parents is, thanks. Thanks for the background checks. Thanks for the training. They may have yelled and screamed on the way to the workshop, but then they tell me how valuable they found the information, and that they wished everybody would go to the workshops!

My sisters and brothers, this is not an anniversary. It's a commemoration. I would like to end with a quote from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 43, written in the 1960s in Vatican II: "Although by the power of the Holy Spirit the Church will remain the faithful spouse of her Lord and will never cease to be a sign of salvation on earth, still she is very well aware that among her members, both clerical and lay, some have been unfaithful to the Spirit of God during the course of many centuries. In the present age, too, it does not escape the Church how great a distance lies between the message she offers and the human failings of those to whom the Gospel is entrusted. Whatever be the judgment of history on these defects, we ought to be conscious of them and struggle against them energetically, lest they inflict more harm on the spread of the Gospel. The church also realizes that in working out her relationship with the world, she also has great need of the ripening, which comes with the experience of the centuries. Led by the Holy Spirit, mother Church unceasingly exalts her sons and daughters to purify and renew themselves as a sign of Christ in the world." Written at Vatican II, we are living these words today, calling us to conversion and to integrity.

It is God's Church, and to even have to talk about this is not pleasant. But as we know, Jesus said to Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." As we admit our weakness, and our brokenness, and our wrongdoing, and sin, we can change our Church and our society.

Most of all, we want the victims to experience healing. If we have heard nothing else tonight, I ask all of us as the Church to pray every day, and more than once a day, for those who have been hurt and victimized. They're ours. They're part of our family. We love them and we want for their healing. Thank you.