

Perspective ■■■

Sins of an errant few must not tarnish all

We've been receiving some angry letters and phone calls lately from readers objecting to news stories about Catholic priests charged with sex offenses.

"We get the picture," a Winchendon woman wrote last week. "You need not hit us over the head with the latest, blow-by-blow coverage of a priest abandoning his sacred vows."

A nun wrote from Uxbridge: "It seems since the Father Porter incident there is almost a personal invectiveness toward the clergy of the Catholic Church in trying to dig up objectionable materials."

An angry voice on the telephone: "When are you going to stop all that priest-bashing? Are you people anti-Catholic?"

No, we are not.

In fact, we feel the anguish in the written and spoken words and sympathize with it. It's painful when the ideals of an institution one holds in high esteem are betrayed.

DUTY TO REPORT

It should be remembered, however, that the press is not the betrayer, merely the bearer of bad news. It is our responsibility, indeed duty, to report the news, unpleasant as it may be.

It is news when a person is indicted for sex crimes, whether he wears a clerical collar or not. When he is found guilty, that, too, is part of the record.

It also is news when a social worker admits to having sexual relations with a patient and is forced to give up his license as the result.

CREATE PERCEPTION

Should the case not be reported because he happens to be a priest? And if exceptions are made for clergymen, why not for doctors, bankers, plumbers, reporters or anyone else?

The concern we share is caused not so much by the sudden proliferation of stories about priests and sexual abuse — they will be forgotten soon — but because of the perception they create in some people's minds about the church itself.

There is no reason to believe that priests today are less faithful to their vows than in the past. Nor is there any evidence that



Robert Z. Nemeth

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immoral behavior is widespread among them.

Most of the cases that have made the headlines involve offenses — or allegations of offenses — committed decades ago. Some of the accusers waited for 20 years or longer to come forward.

It's only recently that society has become acutely aware of sexual abuse, a crime that in the past often was covered up.

In some instances the sudden attention to the problem may have grown into preoccupation.

SHAME AND GUILT

In the past, feelings of shame and guilt may have prevented individuals from pressing charges. The involvement of a priest may have enhanced the inhibition.

In contrast, today some individuals seem almost eager to present themselves as "victims" of events that may have occurred decades ago.

Perhaps they still feel the pain and want their tormentors punished.

Some may seek to explain personal failures or even to justify crimes they themselves have committed. Others could be motivated by the prospect of compensation.

Moreover, church officials — who now maintain sex abuse hotlines — are paying the price for past mistakes in dealing with priests who engaged in sexual misconduct.

Most were sent to special institutions, but church authorities seemed reluctant to face the issue openly. They did not condone wrongdoing but preferred to sweep it under the rug.

Nevertheless, the current uproar should be kept in perspective.

Sexual abuse of children — or adults for that matter — is an ugly offense that must be exposed and punished within and outside the church. But the wrongdoing of a few wayward priests should not tarnish the reputation of all.

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We've read in a recent column by Jim Dempsey about a Catholic priest who was grilled by a woman who saw him playing with a little boy in a hospital waiting room and suspected foul play.

Even though the child needed comforting, it was evident that the woman looked at the priest and saw a potential child abuser.

That is most unfortunate.

FAITHFUL SERVICE

Thousands of priests have served faithfully and with selfless dedication. They've brought hope, comfort, solace, healing and knowledge to millions.

They continue to nurture the sufferer, help the poor, teach the ignorant, care for the sick, comfort the dying, fight injustice and, in most cases, set examples for morality and decency.

To judge them all by the sins of a few makes no more sense than, say, to indict all police officers because some cops took bribes.

It would be tragic if lingering suspicions interfered with the good work priests do.

If a priest — or teacher or social worker — can no longer hug a child to reward or comfort, how will that young person learn about love and affection?

TRUST IS NEEDED

If a man of God, dedicated to helping kids, is forced to keep his distance, what kind of message does he send about friendship and trust?

If we see a child molester in every priest who pats a child on the back, how long can we bear the burden of our own cynicism?

Priests are not superhuman. They share the imperfections common to all members of the species, including psychiatric problems and mental illness.

The few who break the law and betray their calling deserve no sympathy. But the vast majority are entitled to the respect they have long earned.