

Diligent Defender

by Tim Drake

Monica Applewhite is one of the foremost experts on screening, monitoring and policy development for the prevention of sexual abuse and risk management for those with histories of sexual offending. Applewhite has spent the past 16 years conducting research and root-cause analysis in the area of sexual abuse in organizations in order to assist organizations in developing best practice standards. Formerly with Praesidium Inc., she helped create an accreditation system for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men to hold them accountable to the highest standards of child protection. She has worked with more than 300 organizations that serve children and youth, including 28 Catholic dioceses, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the U.S. Jesuit Conference, and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of the Apostolic Life in Rome. Now director of Confianza LLC, a consulting firm specializing in standards of care and the dynamics of abuse in educational and religious environments, she resides in Austin, Texas. Applewhite spoke with Register senior writer Tim Drake.

Drake: The sexual abuse of minors is not particular to the Catholic Church alone, is it?

Applewhite: Unfortunately, sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults happens in all organizations that serve these populations. What is distinctive for the Catholic Church is the saliency of the issue.

Both Catholics and non-Catholics are interested in reading and hearing about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church for a variety of reasons. In some ways, this is fortunate for those of us who advocate for education and prevention because it is an opportunity to address the issue within the Church while bringing to light a society-wide problem most people would prefer not to address.

Drake: Do you have any thoughts on why this has resurfaced at the time it has?

Applewhite: We have been through several cycles of media attention — first in 1985, then in 1992, again in 2002, and now in 2010. It's not that we have new cases — the majority of the cases under discussion are still those from the '60s, '70s and early '80s — but each time the issue arises we are able to analyze different aspects of the problem that should be addressed, from the harm that is caused, to the discipline for those who offend, to the long-term effects on victims, families and communities, and the need for accountability of leaders. The current media attention was sparked by cases in Germany and has led thousands of victims of abuse within the Catholic Church of Europe to come forward and report their own experiences. The German Church has set up a hotline, and thousands of people have already called in to report abuse. I am grateful that the hotline was set up and we can begin to identify the people who have been harmed in this way.

Drake: In the Church's handling of this issue, can you tell me what the Church has done right?

Applewhite: The Church in the U.S. is the first large-scale organization to take two important steps toward healing and prevention of future incidents of abuse. We are the first to conduct a full prevalence study to determine how many incidents, how many victims and how many perpetrators of abuse there were from 1950 to 2002. The John Jay College [of Criminal Justice] conducted this comprehensive research, and it is published on the USCCB website. Anyone who truly wants to know "the problem" we are facing should review the findings. Secondly, the Roman Church is the first institution of its size to implement a full program of accountability to ensure the implementation of its reform efforts. Again, an outside team, the Gavin Group, has conducted the audits of the dioceses. Large-scale organizational change, deep cultural change simply does not happen without accountability.

Drake: Is there much of a difference between what happens when a priest is accused today and what happened prior to 2002 (when the charter and norms were adopted)?

Applewhite: In most situations, no. The reforms of the Church began long before 2002. As laws changed, as understanding of sexual abuse and sexual offenders developed, so did the procedures of the Church in most local dioceses and communities. It was 1992 when the bishops first began following the "Five Principles," which included pastoral outreach to victims, investigations and open communication with communities. Published in 1992, the bishops' five principles were:

1. respond promptly to all allegations of abuse,

2. relieve the alleged offender promptly of his ministerial duties and refer him for appropriate medical evaluation and intervention,
3. comply with the obligations of civil law as regards reporting of the incident,
4. reach out to the victims and their families, and
5. deal as openly as possible with the members of the community.

What changed in 2002 was a dramatic improvement in uniformity, both within and across dioceses and religious communities. The toughest situations have always been when the allegation is against an extremely talented and charismatic priest, religious or lay minister. These are the situations in any organization that are the most divisive, the most difficult and the most likely to be handled improperly. When the allegation seems impossible, in the absence of accountability, there is often a temptation to hope the situation will just “go away.” In 2002, listening to stories of victims who were abused by just this type of offender, the bishops and religious superiors made commitments that would end “the exceptions.” These commitments and the associated accountability also addressed the fact that some leaders had simply elected not to follow the guidance of the five principles, and that also brought greater uniformity to the handling of allegations.

Drake: What criticisms remain regarding the Church's handling of these cases?

Applewhite: Much of the public criticism of the Church's early handling of cases stems from a lack of knowledge about the historical context of this phenomenon. I have seen newspaper articles criticizing officials for not reporting acts of abuse to the civil authorities during years when there were no child protective services and the particular behaviors involved were not criminalized yet. It is fair for criticism of decisions made in the '60s and '70s to focus on interpretation of moral behavior, weakness in the resolve of leaders or even the disregard of procedures set out in canon law. By the same token, it is essential to separate this from expectations that are based on the laws and standards of today.

We began studying sexual abuse in the 1970s, discovered it caused real harm in 1978, and realized perpetrators were difficult to rehabilitate in the 1990s. During the '70s when we were sending offenders to treatment, the criminal justice system was doing the very same thing with convicted offenders — sending them to treatment instead of prison. At the time, it was believed they could be cured with relative ease. This is a very young body of knowledge, and as we sort through both valid and questionable criticisms, we must consider the historical context of any given episode.

Regarding the work that remains to be done, the most pressing concern for me is the lack of protocols to guide the supervision and accountability for priests and religious who have been accused or found to have sexually offended in the past or who have completed their obligations to the criminal justice system. There continues to be a belief that aging and the passing of time will render these men safe. I understand we cannot supervise them if they are no longer a priest or religious, but as long as they are, we should strive to know how they spend their time and whether they are upholding the limits that have been placed on them.

Drake: Much criticism has been leveled at Pope Benedict XVI. Do you view that criticism as valid?

Applewhite: From my perspective, deep change in the culture of the Vatican began with Cardinal Ratzinger and has been solidified since he became Pope Benedict XVI. When I began working with priests who had sexually offended, they would sometimes try to intimidate me with threats that if they “sent their case to Rome” to appeal how they were treated, that they would “win.” This was in response to my developing systems to hold them accountable for how they spent their time, who they visited and whether the people in their lives were aware of the sexual abuse they had committed. Many times I heard, “You are in violation of my rights!” They clearly felt they had the upper hand. Since that time, and particularly since 2000, the balance of power has shifted. I have since worked with many priests and religious who have sexually offended against minors, and if you ask them today, they would be very unlikely to assume that “Rome” is on their side.

Today, clerical and religious sexual offenders recognize they can be laicized for their crimes or for a failure to adhere to obedience. This gives us much more leverage in terms of ensuring adherence to safety provisions. Several men I know have “tested” the CDF (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) and found no tolerance for

sexual abuse in the priesthood and no sympathy for the cleric who disagrees with programs of prayer and penance. Evidence of where Pope Benedict XVI stands can be found in the following examples:

1. He was the one who declared the use of Internet and other forms of child pornography to be a *delictum gravius* (a “grave delict”) — the same as a contact offense with a minor. He came to this conclusion at a time when many criminal jurisdictions were still debating the criminality of Internet pornography.
2. When he [became Pope], he appointed Cardinal [William] Levada from the U.S., clearly the country most likely to produce a stringent successor. As the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Levada has continued the legacy of increasingly strong response to sexual offenses by priests and religious.
3. The victims of sexual abuse who met with the Holy Father here in the U.S. were deeply touched by their meeting. They said they felt like he knew their cases personally. It is possible he did or that he has just known so many that are similar. I give great credibility to those victims who met with him personally. If they say he “gets it,” I am inclined to believe them. It is also important to know that in Pope Benedict XVI we have the individual who has seen more cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church than perhaps anyone else in the world. I believe he knows how serious the problem is, and that he understands the sacrifices that have to be made to fix it.

Drake: Do you know why then-Cardinal Ratzinger suggested that the cases be handled by the CDF rather than the Congregation for Clergy?

Applewhite: I cannot say why Cardinal Ratzinger implemented the system of all cases being handled by the CDF in 2001, but I can speak to my own experience of this change. Prior to 2001, some cases of sexual abuse were sent to the CDF, some to the Congregation for Clergy, some to the Congregation for Religious, and some religious communities sent cases to their own general superiors. As you can imagine, this made for considerable variation in the response and handling of the cases, because the various congregations made their own interpretations and could be more or less inclined toward stringency or leniency. I was involved in investigations and review of cases to be sent to Rome beginning in 1996. Back then, the process was very slow, and it was difficult to predict whether the evidence would be considered “enough” for a conviction in the ecclesiastical system.

Since 2001, the system has become much more uniform. There is a “form” of how to write up the case so that all allegations and the outcomes of investigations are clearly documented. Many trials are held locally, and the process is much faster. Even more importantly, the CDF gives support and credibility to bishops and superiors who are involved in disciplinary procedures, from removal from ministry to laicization. I still believe the rights of priests and religious are respected and upheld, but there is a greater attention to the needs of the community to be safe from harm.

Drake: Do you think this is going to end up defining Benedict’s papacy?

Applewhite: Perhaps, but not in a negative way. Now that so much information is coming forward I believe two things will happen. First, we will all be privy to the information we need in order to understand how much Pope Benedict’s resolve and commitment have already changed the system within our Church. We needed a pope that did not mind being considered “tough” and that is what we have. Instead of change happening “behind the scenes,” we will know about it. Second, all of the media attention and worldwide interest will give Pope Benedict just the political opportunity and leverage he needs to change the Church culture of silence and protection throughout the world — much faster. He won’t have to “sell” change in the way he would have if this had not happened. Many of the barriers he has encountered for more than a decade will be broken down. I believe this will solidify his legacy as the agent of change and restoration of the Church for which he would want to be remembered.

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