

Teachers Vs. Priests

Unequal Treatment in the Media?

by Wayne Laugesen

NEW YORK — When the Associated Press set out to investigate an apparent problem with sexual assault of children in public schools, the organization spared no expense. A congressionally mandated study by Hofstra University had already found school-based sexual abuse to be a big problem. “It was one of our priorities for the year,” said John Affleck, editor of the AP’s national reporting team. The result was a three-part series, available to editors throughout the country beginning Oct. 20, that revealed widespread and routine sexual assault of public school students throughout the country. The first story summarized: “Students in America’s schools are groped. They’re raped. They’re pursued, seduced and think they’re in love.” The series told of an entrenched resistance to stopping abusers on the part of teachers, administrators and the National Education Association, a teacher’s union. So why apparently have only a handful of newspapers nationwide run the series — in stark contrast to the avalanche of press received by the Catholic Church since 2002?

Paul Colford, corporate communications director for the AP, said he was inundated with complaints from people wondering why their newspapers were not carrying the series. The AP’s investigation found more than 2,500 cases over five years in which educators were punished for actions “from bizarre to sadistic.” It said that on any given day, three educators are actively “hitting on” students, thus speaking to “a much larger problem in a system that is stacked against victims.” It quoted a California lawyer who has spent 30 years investigating school abuse, saying that every school district in the country likely hosts at least one sex abuser. By contrast, the series pointed out, over a 52-year period, some 4,400 priests were “accused” of molestation. “I received inquiries from readers who were frustrated,” Colford said. “They had heard about the story and couldn’t find it in some cases. In other instances, their local paper had carried one part of the series, but not the rest of it.” Colford said most who complained about an inability to find the stories were academics, psychologists, lawyers, social workers and professional researchers. Colford said AP officials have no accurate process for determining which newspapers ran part or all of the series, short of embarking on a research project.

Catholic League President Bill Donohue complained in early November that the AP’s member newspapers were ignoring the story, even though they routinely run stories about decades-old allegations of sexual abuse by priests. He conducted a search of Nexis, a central database for newspapers to archive articles. Two weeks after the series was released, Donohue found, the search indicated that only five newspapers carried the entire series. “A Nexis search is a very poor indicator of how many papers have published a story,” Colford said, explaining that publications have different timelines and processes for filing their stories, and some never file wire copy. Affleck, who is defensive of his team’s series, said he was confident it received satisfactory play in the nation’s press. He had no data to back the claim, but shuffled through clippings of the story in an effort to show the Register that newspapers have published it. He said his own research revealed that the series had been promoted with a teaser in 90 newspapers on the day it was released. By contrast, newspapers throughout the country — nearly all of them — obsessed over the *Boston Globe* “Spotlight” stories, carried by AP, about sexual abuse by priests in one diocese that mishandled the reports.

Martin Nussbaum, a Colorado Springs-based attorney who has represented Boston and other dioceses in sex abuse-related cases, conducted research of stories regarding old allegations of sex abuse in the Church. “The *Boston Globe* began publishing on Jan. 6, 2002, a series of reports regarding sexual abuse of children by priests in the Archdiocese of Boston,” Nussbaum wrote “In a flash, newspapers around the country began reprinting the *Globe*’s reports and developing their own. They published 728 stories in January; 1,095 in February, and 2,961 in March. By April, these papers were publishing a new story every nine minutes, 160 every day, 4,791 for the month. By year-end, American papers provided their readers over 21,000 stories of sexual abuse by Catholic priests.”

Boston Globe editors contacted by the Register claimed only vague knowledge of the AP series, and could not answer as to whether part of it ran in their paper. “I think we may have handled pieces of it, but I’m really not sure,” said Jim Smith, the *Globe*’s political editor. “I’ll look into it.” A library employee, who would identify himself only as “Mark,” agreed to search a database of *Globe* content. He said he’d be surprised to find the AP’s report. “We don’t run much wire copy,” Mark said. “We would likely do our own story.”

On Nov. 15, more than three weeks after the AP's series became available, Mark found only one story containing the phrase "sexual abuse." But the story had nothing to do with the public school system. Rather, the story — wire copy originating at the *Los Angeles Times* — was about sexual assault in the Catholic Church. The story told how "multimillion dollar financial settlements reached with victims of priest sexual abuse have created new financial stresses for Catholic schools." Patrick Chappell, a 19-year-old freshman at Loyola University in Chicago, was molested as a high school student by the former president of the Estes Park, Colo., school district. His family fled the town and enrolled him in a Catholic school when public school teachers and a coach showed open hostility toward the family for turning in the abuser. The perpetrator, while free on bond, was forbidden from being near minors. "I remember there was this reception in the school for one of his friends, and he showed up," Chappell said. "There were minors all over the place, and he was there despite the court order that said to stay away from kids. Everyone knew who he was. He was Mr. Estes Park, a pillar of the community."

After taking refuge at a Catholic school in suburban Boulder, Chappell began speaking to children at public schools in Denver. "I spoke to raise awareness about this problem, because if I had been told about it this wouldn't have happened to me," Chappell said. "Never did I speak that a child didn't come out to me or a guidance counselor as a victim of rape. Not once. In my opinion, the media have a great potential to make parents and children aware of this threat. They should take it. Most children who are raped are not raped by priests." Howard Kurtz, a *Washington Post* writer who's among the best-known media critics in the country, declined to speak with the Register about the media's seemingly disparate treatment of sex assault in public schools, as compared to Catholic institutions. Kurtz wrote in an e-mail: "I'm afraid I'm just not up on the subject. Sorry."

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