

Impact Statement of David Clohessy

By David Clohessy

Speech at the USCCB Meeting in Dallas TX

June 13, 2002

Nine years ago, the roles were reversed. I stood silently as Father Gary's side offering support, as he became the first priest in America to sue a priest and his bishop over the crime of childhood sexual abuse. It was a huge honor then and it's a huge honor today.

We're not here because you want us to be. We're not here because we've earned it or have fought hard for it. We're here because children are a gift from God, and Catholic parents know this! That's why 87% of them think that if you've helped molesters commit their crimes, you should resign. Because of their outrage, we stand before you today. Though Bishop Gregory played a role, and though the letterhead said US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the return address on that invitation was really thousands of parishes across the country. We are really here because of millions of caring Catholics. We in SNAP are grateful to them, and we join these parishioners, your parishioners in saying "Enough!"

Originally, I was encouraged to talk about my personal experience, about being sodomized and molested, and the effect it's had on my life. I've done it plenty of times, and I've got lots of material to choose from. I could talk about those especially awful days in the early 90s when I'd get up each day, shower, shave and dress, and half the time, couldn't bring myself to walk out the front door of my apartment.

I could describe curling up in the fetal position and sobbing hysterically, and having to get up and change bed sheets soaked with tears, while Laura patiently held me.

I could talk about nightmares, about depression, about sexual problems, about how, even now, almost daily, I somehow feel like a fraud.

But honestly, my pain is just garden-variety sexual terror. It's no different than my colleagues have endured. It's certainly no worse.

I've not been countersued like Eddie in Philadelphia. I'm not homeless, like Mark's friend in New Jersey. I've not been in court for nine years like Lee. I'm not in jail, like Lou. My perpetrator is not still serving in a parish, like Steve Pona's abuser, Father Bruce Forman. And noone held public rallies for my abuser, and tied yellow ribbons to trees to show support for him. That happened to Karen. I've not gotten death threats, like our founder, Barbara Blaine.

And I'm here. I've survived. Not all of us do. In fact, just one perpetrator, Father Larsen of Wichita Kansas, is responsible for the lives of five young men, who committed suicide. One of them, 29 year old Eric Patterson, comes from a beautiful family I am honored to know.

Through SNAP, we've heard hundreds of stories. Stories that have made Catholic weep, that would leave you feeling nauseous.

But 15 minutes isn't long. And I'm confident that you'll hear deep pain passionately expressed by the other survivors you have hand-picked for today's talks. I applaud them for having the courage to be here.

In the past, we've described bishops' response to sexual crimes as putting a dirty bandage on an infected wound. Members of SNAP, the men and women who have become my family, are doctors or nurses, working to rid their bodies and the body of the Church of this terrible infection.

Because they do this hard and noble work, my colleagues deserve your deepest gratitude. I long for the day when they are invited on to this stage, and can honorably accept that invitation, and be recognized for their dedication, their achievement and their service to this church.

Of course, the greatest honor you could offer them might also be the hardest one--to radically change your behavior. To do what Jesus would do, when a deeply wounded survivor walks through your door.

To work for prevention, by starting "safe touch" programs in every Catholic school, so kids learn how to protect themselves.

To lobby to extend or eliminate the statutes of limitations and make all clergy mandatory reporters of sexual abuse, so survivors can seek justice, perpetrators can be jailed, and kids can be safe. To insist that your lawyers stop using hardball legal tactics against wounded survivors.

Enough. I promised myself I wouldn't preach to you.

Let me close with a message to Catholic lay people.

We're all human. We shudder from horror. We instinctively recoil when confronted by horror on an almost daily basis. That's what we've all experienced for months. Though our hearts are caring, our stomachs recoil from tragic story after tragic story of abuse and coverup.

But for the sake of our children, we must fight this temptation--the temptation to turn away, to magically assume that somehow, a new day has dawned in Dallas. That somehow, your words alone will miraculously transform a systemic problem that is deeply rooted in the power structure of the church.

To believe this would be terribly misguided and premature. To believe, based on promises alone, that this will soon become a safer church, is to again put children in harm's way.

In the past, because of your cover ups, some Catholics have withheld their financial support, giving money elsewhere. Others have withheld their bodies, staying home from Mass.

But to make this Church safer for everyone--vulnerable kids and vulnerable adults--Catholics must now withhold something else. They must withhold their judgement.

Don't settle for cheap talk, grave expressions of concern, eloquent apologies, for pledges to do better.

What we're talking about is sometimes called "cheap grace." Don't settle for it. Hold out for the real thing. That's what our children deserve.

Now, we worry that your actions at this meeting may amount to putting a fresh clean bandage on an infected wound. In other words, merely promising to do better isn't enough.

Hold out for real change. Real change is what your children deserve. Real change will keep them safe. Don't turn away. Don't settle for less.