
Coalition Commentary

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Indifference and Complicity: Sexual Abuse in the Church

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When Stephen Cook retracted his allegations of childhood sexual abuse against Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, some were led to question the validity of sexual abuse allegations against priests. But many cases of sexual abuse by clergy have been successfully prosecuted. They are usually accompanied by an admission of guilt by the priest and proof that the church knew of the priest's abusive acts.

Allegations of sexual abuse cost the Catholic church \$2.8 million in 1993, up \$1.1 million from the year before. The costs accounted for more than half the church's \$4.5 million deficit for 1993. To date, more than \$500 million has been spent by the Catholic church defending itself and paying survivors.¹³

The highest single settlement to an individual appears to be \$3.5 million to a man sexually abused as a child by a priest named Thomas Adamson. This award of \$2.7 million came as punitive damages against the diocese for "willful indifference or deliberate lack of concern." For 23 years, the church knew about Adamson's molestations of children, but continued to transfer him to new parishes. Adamson molested as many as 35 boys.⁴

Several other significant cases demonstrate the scope of the problem in terms of numbers of children abused, psychological damage to victims, and the reactions of the church.

One of the most well-known cases involves Father James Porter, a Massachusetts priest who sexually abused up to 130 girls and boys in the early 1960s. The Porter case is particularly well-documented, with a number of adults willing to come forward and talk publicly of the abuse. A large number of adult survivors, some with delayed and fragmented memories, organized to implicate Porter and bring him to criminal and civil justice.

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Father James Porter was a priest at St. Mary's church and school in North Attleboro, Massachusetts. During the three years he spent at St. Mary's, he molested 50-100 children with acts that ranged from fondling to rape. The children did not discuss it among themselves, and it was apparently disclosed only to a few adults. In 1963, after complaints, Porter was reassigned to another parish in Massachusetts, and then to New Mexico, Texas and Minnesota. He molested children everywhere he went. Following a three-year suspension, he voluntarily left the

priesthood in 1974, and was eventually arrested for molesting his children's babysitter.

Over a period of years, adults who had been molested as children by Porter began calling the Massachusetts parish, looking for confirmation of the abuse or to discover the whereabouts of Porter. The former victims made these calls independently of one another, each believing he or she was the only victim. They spoke with Father Annunziato, Porter's former colleague, who said to one victim, "I've been praying for you and others for many years now, but I think it's best to leave this in the hands of God."

The formal aspects of the case against Porter were initiated by Frank Fitzpatrick, a victim of Porter's who also happened to be a private investigator. Fitzpatrick began having memories of the abuse in 1989, at the age of 39, after years of suffering the many stress-related problems and illnesses caused by sexual abuse. Once the memories returned, Fitzpatrick's goal became the pursuit of justice. The diocese would give him no information about Porter. After combing newspapers and records, Fitzpatrick found in an obituary for Porter's father that Porter lived in Minnesota. He obtained Porter's address from the Minnesota Department of Motor Vehicles, and then found his phone number through directory assistance. He called

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