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## Editorial | After AG's report, restoring trust may mean more pain

Mar 5, 2016



The Most Rev. Mark L. Bartchak, Bishop of the Altoona-Johnstown diocese held a news conference at Diocesan Administration Center, Hollidaysburg, Pa., Thursday, March 3, 2016.

Todd Berkey/Tribune-Democrat



Bishop Mark Bartchak took the first steps Thursday to rebuild the faith of the region in its most important institutions in the wake of the stunning and tragic revelation that hundreds of young people had been abused by priests over many decades.

Rebuilding trust may take generations, because these accusations include both religious leaders and those in local law-enforcement.

Bartchak spoke two days after the state Office of Attorney General reported that for more than 40 years, priests in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown had been preying on children, scarring their bodies with sexual acts and scarring their minds with the abuse of power and positions of trust.

That alone would have been difficult to overcome.

But the abuse of power went much further, the report showed,

Kathleen Kane's report, based on a grand jury's work launched by 2013 allegations of abuse at Bishop McCort Catholic High School, accused the diocese's two previous bishops – James Hogan and Joseph Adamec – of covering up the hundreds of transgressions by those priests by shielding them from prosecution and shifting the offenders from parish to parish.

The AG's report also alleged that key members of the law-enforcement community, including individuals in the Cambria County District Attorney's Office, had conspired with the diocese to keep priests out of the legal system. Named in the AG's report were former Cambria Judge Gerard Long and current Judge Patrick Kiniry, both ex-county prosecutors.

Monsignor Phillip Saylor testified before the grand jury, and said the church had considerable power over area law-enforcement agencies, but that those legal entities often called upon the church to handle its problems outside the courtroom.

"In Johnstown, I would basically pick the mayor; I would pick the chief of police," Saylor, who worked under Hogan, said in testimony. He added that judges often went to the diocese and asked the religious organization to get pedophile priests "under control," the report said.

Specifically, the report recounts meetings between Hogan and Kiniry in 1985 concerning the conduct of the Rev. Francis B. McCaa, whom the AG's office called "a monster" whose child victims numbered "in the hundreds."

Both Long and Kiniry appeared before the grand jury, and both blamed the power of the Catholic church in how priest allegations were handled – or mishandled.

Kiniry is quoted by the AG as saying on Jan. 12:

"Back then, the diocese moved the problem; that's just how it was."

Long, in September 2015, called his 1980s team in the DA's office "pretty strict Catholics," suggesting those prosecutors could not see beyond their own beliefs in pursuing justice.

Can Kiniry preside over future legal matters in Cambria County without first attempting to explain his actions as assistant district attorney? To sit as judge requires the trust of the community whose residents appear before the bench.

We understand the power of the church, which chose canon law – handling its problems internally – over the laws of the state and nation.

Local Catholics responded to the news Tuesday with a mix of shock and defiance.

Outside St. John Gualbert Cathedral in downtown Johnstown following noon Mass, Jerry Karafa said the attorney general was "picking on the Catholics. They plaster it on national news – everywhere. You don't hear about the Methodists or the Lutherans. They have problems, too."

Joanne and Jack Vasilko told reporter Kecia Bal that while the acts by the more than 35 priests accused in the report are terrible, the crimes do not represent the church. "As a Catholic, I'm not going to give up my religion because of this," Joanne Vasilko said.

Some church-goers may find their faith strengthened by this ordeal. Others may choose to pull away from religion.

This is a hard truth to face, to attempt to understand.

Bartchak was smart to come forward and apologize to the people who suffered directly from the culture of abuse, and to the community – Catholics and others – who must now come to grips with the tragedy.

The bishop was lauded by the attorney general for removing priests from service once they had been identified by the grand jury – something his predecessors did not do. Bartchak promised further changes in how the diocese operates, steps to better protect children in the many parishes across the Altoona-Johns-town region.

But what of our trust in the legal system?

As of this writing, neither Kiniry nor Long had addressed the implications that they looked the other way while children were being sexually abused.

That leaves only the report to speak for their actions.

Long is retired from the bench. Kiniry must not remain silent concerning his role in the abuses detailed by the attorney general.

If he cannot refute the claims, Kiniry should resign – another small step toward healing for the region hurt by the actions of so many priests, and those around them who failed to inter-cede on behalf of those children.



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