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Paedophile priests 'damage church'

Pope John Paul II has acknowledged the problem

By BBC News Online's Peter Gould

The Roman Catholic Church in the United States is being urged to set up independent bodies to investigate allegations of sexual abuse by priests.

The call comes from the influential Catholic magazine America, which devotes a large part of its Easter issue to a crisis it says has caused "enormous pain and great scandal" in the church.

In a strongly-worded editorial, the magazine says that crimes committed by priests have physically, psychologically and spiritually damaged hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children and their families.

> A climate of secrecy and reluctance to challenge those in authority helped cover up the abuse
>
> Editorial
> America magazine

"They have torn apart parish communities and smeared the reputation of anyone wearing a Roman collar," says America.

"The attempts by some bishops to cover up the crimes have shocked those in and outside the church more than any other event in memory."

Scandal

Last week, in his annual letter to priests, Pope John Paul II referred to the "sins of our brothers", and admitted that some

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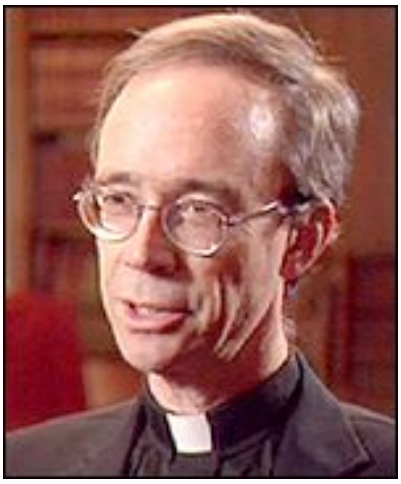
priests had succumbed to "the most grievous form of evil".

It was the first time the pontiff had referred to sexual abuse by priests since the paedophile scandal in the United States church.

Millions of dollars have already been paid to settle claims by people who say priests abused them as children.



Father Thomas Reese, editor of America

There have been allegations that the church tried for years to cover up cases of abuse, rather than admit the problem.

In its editorial, America says the fact that some priests were moved to other parishes, where they again violated children, is deplorable and inexcusable.

The magazine says that despite growing concern in the 1980s, some bishops had continued to believe the problem was being blown out of proportion by the media.

And after cases of sexual abuse became public knowledge, the US bishops' conference had repeatedly said it had no authority to impose rules, and had to respect the autonomy of local bishops.

Anger

The editorial says that it is probably too late for Episcopal resignations to make much difference.

"If early on, some bishops had been willing to claim full responsibility and resign, victims, parishes, the media and juries might have been less inclined to vent their anger on the church as a whole," it says.

"That not one bishop (except the two who were themselves abusers) has resigned during this 15-year-long crisis is astonishing."

> "The bishops, even those who have done the right thing, now have no credibility in policing the clergy"
>
> Editorial
> America magazine

The magazine argues that following a series of apologies by US bishops, there should now be a service of penance, and a willingness to listen to people's complaints and opinions.

"A climate of secrecy and reluctance to challenge those in authority helped cover up the abuse," it says.

Investigations

The editorial says there is a need for a new system for investigating allegations of sexual abuse.

It says no professional group is good at policing itself. And it is even more difficult for the clergy, not only because they are investigating their brothers, but also because their whole training urges them towards forgiveness, rather than punishment.

"The bishops, even those who have done the right thing, now have no credibility in policing the clergy," it says.

"No one will trust a clean bill of health given by a clerical board."

What is needed, says the magazine, is an independent lay board in each diocese empowered to investigate every allegation against a priest or church employee.

"Only such a board could credibly clear priests falsely accused of a crime," it says.

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