

## Four Courageous Conversations: Responding to the Catholic Church Sexual Abuse Crisis The Cathedral Parish of the Immaculate Conception

**Background:** In March 2019, we held a “prayer and listening session” on the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. We implemented the “Four Courageous Conversations” format provided on the diocesan website and developed by Dobie Moser and Sean Reynolds. We were faithful to the process with our three groups, two of which were conducted in Spanish. The three table leaders, who were also the recorders, were the chair of our pastoral council who is a husband and father of four, a religious sister who is the director of faith formation, and a physician who is a parishioner, wife and mother of two daughters. Another religious sister, a certified clinician and social worker, facilitated the session which began with prayer and ended with a “check out” where participants could share their feelings on the evening. There were about 30 parishioners who attended. What needs to be stated first is that there already are procedures and boards in place which the participants did not know about. So, some concerns raised (e.g. establishment of a diocesan review board) have been in place for some time. This prayer and listening session is the impetus to ensuring that parishioners know these things in an ongoing way.

Data were culled together, so that a “coding exercise” of keywords which appeared frequently could be analyzed to suggest some themes and perhaps a theory. The salient points are discussed below.

### **What are your feelings regarding the Catholic Church Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?**

There was a consistent sense of shame and anger leveled at the perpetrators and the institution (priests and bishops) who may have played a part in the silence and/or cover up. There was a felt need for justice and accountability for the guilty, as well as an assurance needed that this will never happen again. Prayers went out to the victims with a demand for justice meted out to them. What is not known is the size of this scandal. Surely, there will be more reports from other dioceses. The participants felt a sense of embarrassment having to address this issue but felt resolute in their commitment to the Catholic Church despite negative comments from people of other faiths. There was great concern for faithful priests and how this impacts them. Moving forward, there is a felt need to educate children better with respect to sex and sexuality. This is perhaps more paramount when many Latinos state that this is a neglected conversation in the community. Finally, there was the recognition that this will have a serious economic impact on the church.

### **What are the two or three most important factors that you identify as the root causes of the current Catholic Church Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?**

**Power** was the most central issue raised concerning this crisis. This is viewed in various ways: an abuse & arrogance of power, power over, and powerlessness. Some noted that there was too much reverence (power, prestige) for the clergy which some wielded in a “power over” manner taking advantage of children. This “reverence” made the priest believable over the victim (powerless). The shame of the incident, along with the taboo of sex or the inability to discuss and/or manage it, kept victims from coming forward as we still see today in many other sectors of society. The powerful church, especially its potent hierarchy, did everything to protect its image. Perhaps its intention was to not give scandal to the faithful or worse yet to protect its coffers, but the mishandling of the problem and the inability for the church to police herself created the crisis. The Church had too much concentrated power. Clericalism and secularism are two contributing factors.

Added to the power issue is the accountability issue. This was seen in moving troubled priests around the diocese. It is still seen as a lack of lay involvement in committees and the sharing of power. Transparency must be clear moving forward. Integrity needs to rule out secrecy.

There was speculation that some of the perpetrators never had a “true vocation” or had bad motivations for becoming a priest. Many raised concerned over the spiritual formation of the clergy, expressed a need for better scrutiny in the admissions process, including but not limited to lay involvement in the recruitment process, and the hope for ongoing spiritual direction.

**What are the two or three most important things that you want church leadership (any level – include the roles or levels in your comments if you wish) to be aware of as they and we consider how to respond to the current Catholic Church Sexual Clergy Sex Abuse Crises?**

Lay involvement is paramount especially with the ongoing protection of children and vulnerable adults (e.g. diocesan review board). Make lay involvement central to the life of the Church. Any credible accusation must be communicated with absolute transparency.

The diocese (bishop, priests, pastors) needs to share clearly and in an ongoing way such things as the makeup of the diocesan review board, reporting recommendations, background check process for all diocesan employees, training programs that impact our youth (e.g., the lures program that explains safe touch and inappropriate touch) and look for ways to better educate our families on sex and sexuality especially as the mores of today’s society decline quickly.

Provide the best psychosexual, spiritual formation for our seminarians possible.

**All of this says to me that... (the beginning prompt)**

All must be held accountable, those who committed crimes and those who aided and abetted in a form of “cover up.”

Education of parents and children around this issue needs to improve. Seek help from mental health professionals and their resources.

Parents and society need to be responsible for educating their children about sex and sexual abuse.

The Bishop may be really interested into what we are saying.

A closing prayer and “check out” revealed a sense of appreciation for having this forum in an open and honest environment. People enjoyed the freedom to discuss the issue and were comforted by others’ opinions and concerns. They listened without judgment and were grateful for the opportunity.

***Things helpful to know about this issue:***

**Addendum A:** The Diocesan Review Board

The Diocesan Review Board is comprised of a seated pastor, a retired priest, two women religious (a principal and a MSW), the other members of the DRB are lay persons from a variety of backgrounds including two lawyers, two psychologists, and a businesswoman.

As to the process:

If an accusation is made against a priest – the following steps are taken:

1. The accused priest is removed from his assignment and placed on administrative leave until the DRB makes a determination.
2. Notification is made to the local prosecutor in the county where the abuse is reported to have occurred.
3. Outreach to the victim through the Victim's Assistance Coordinator is made.
4. The facts of the accusation are assembled (what the victim says and where records indicate the accused priest served at the time).
5. The report and facts are made to the DRB:
  - a. The DRB first determines whether the accusation is credible (i.e., more likely true than not) in accord with civil standards (clear and with convincing evidence)
  - b. The DRB second determines whether the accusation is credible in accord with canonical standards
6. If the DRB finds the accusation credible, the priest is sent for evaluation.
7. If the DRB finds the accusation is not credible, the priest is restored to ministry.

**Addendum B:** The New Jersey Independent Compensation Program for Victims of Church Sexual Abuse of Minors is explained and posted on the diocesan website.

**Addendum C:** The mission of The Office of Child and Youth Protection is to protect the children who are entrusted into the care of the Diocese of Camden and to ensure that the Diocese is doing everything possible to be in safe environment compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, a document disseminated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Standards for protection are listed on the diocesan website. All diocesan employees, especially those in contact with children, go through a rigorous background clearance.

**Addendum D:** There is a lay board that screens applicants for the seminary and passes its recommendations on to the Bishop.