

Pastoral report on the listening sessions in the diocese regarding the crisis of clergy sexual abuse

During the past six months, a barrage of revelations about historic patterns of sexual abuse of minors in the Church has shaken the Catholic community in the United States. To better understand and address these piercing issues, Bishop Robert W. McElroy held eight listening sessions with the laity throughout the Diocese of San Diego. More than 2,000 Catholics in San Diego and Imperial counties attended these encounters. Bishop McElroy also held a listening session with the priests, one with the women religious of the diocese and one with the Pastoral Center staff.

These are the major themes that surfaced during those meetings:

1) The need to confront the challenges of this moment by placing Christ at the center of all our deliberations and actions.

Many participants in the listening sessions witnessed to this reality in their personal comments and repeatedly stated that we must remember that Christ abides in the life of the Church continually and will lead us through this time of turmoil.

2) The need to focus unswervingly on the suffering and healing of the victims and survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

Across the regions of the diocese, the listening sessions reflected a consistent emphasis upon the centrality of those who have been victimized, and the need for the Church to reach out in additional ways to victims to provide substantial healing and support.

3) The Pennsylvania grand jury report

What dominated the comments of the listening session about the Pennsylvania report was not the acts of abuse in themselves, but the disillusionment caused by the fact that bishops and other Church leaders during the last century covered up such abuse and so often reassigned priests who had abused children and young people.

4) The McCarrick scandal

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick's misconduct with adult seminarians was substantially known in the Church as far back as 2000, when he was being made a cardinal. Last year, he was removed from the College of Cardinals by Pope Francis when the allegation of abuse of a minor arose.

The questions at the listening sessions centered upon the anger and disbelief among lay Catholics about how McCarrick could have been promoted to cardinal by Pope John Paul II, allowed to remain archbishop of Washington by Pope Benedict, and allowed to function actively as a cardinal in his retirement under Pope Francis. Many questioners cited a letter written by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganó calling for a comprehensive investigation of this history. Participants in the sessions also raised the issue of a letter which psychologist Richard Sipe sent to Bishop McElroy and the Vatican in 2016 raising allegations of sexual misconduct with seminarians by McCarrick. Bishop McElroy asked Dr. Sipe for corroboration for these allegations, but Dr. Sipe stated that the confidential nature of the information precluded him from providing this.

5) The investigation of allegations of abuse

There were many questions about the nature of the process of evaluating allegations of sexual abuse that come to the diocese, and about the work of the Independent Review Board that is charged with judging the truthfulness of such allegations. Questioners asked how the members of this board are chosen and how their independence is guaranteed. What is their method of procedure? Several wanted to know whether the board is audited by any independent agency. They also asked repeatedly about the policies of the diocese for reporting to police authorities allegations of the abuse of minors that are received. In addition to these concerns, substantial questions were raised about sexual misconduct by clergy against adults, particularly misconduct that involves patterns of abuse.

6) Homosexuality

Many of those who attended the listening sessions focused upon the issue of homosexuality as a central element in the sexual abuse crisis. They noted that the victims of sexual abuse of minors by clergy have been predominantly teenage boys, and they see a gay subculture at work in the priesthood and the episcopacy. These participants consider it essential to eliminate from the priesthood and seminaries men with a homosexual orientation to restore a faithful celibate priesthood. They also called for firing any actively gay employees within the diocese.

7) Clericalism

There were strong suggestions from participants that the clerical culture in the Church needs to be challenged. Support for individual priests was high, but many believed that a central element of the sexual abuse crisis was a privileged status for priests that protected them from the consequences of their actions. There was widespread support for a radical expansion of the power of lay men and women in the Church at all levels. In particular, it was suggested that roles for women should be expanded and that the life of the Church needed to be more fully infused by the insights and perspectives of women. Questions were raised about the wisdom of requiring celibacy for priests. A number of participants called for the examination of admitting women to the priesthood.

6) Seminary formation

A substantial number of participants raised concerns about the seminary formation of our priests. Some of these focused upon the belief that seminaries are havens for sexual predators who victimize seminarians. Other comments centered on the psychological training given to our seminarians and the need for substantive psycho-sexual formation.