

## Opening the statute of limitations

Dear Friends,

Good morning. Last week, I listened to Dom Giordano interview Sister Maureen Paul Turlish, a Catholic nun, who'd written an op-ed column about sex abuse in the Philadelphia Inquirer (Nov. 26). She also testified at the Delaware Legislature in support of the recently signed Delaware Child Victims Law. The law opens the statute of limitations window against sex predators for two years. Victims can file suits against pedophiles, regardless of how many years elapsed from the date of the abuse.

That 10:30 p.m. interview on WPHT (1210 AM) was as fascinating as the op-ed piece that prompted it.

In July 2005, the Philadelphia Grand Jury criticized the Philadelphia Archdiocese for its unwillingness to identify and expel pedophile priests. The Pennsylvania Legislature responded to the Grand Jury report by introducing two bills, which would have opened the statute of limitations window so victims could press their claims.

California did so ... and it cost the Los Angeles Archdiocese \$600 million. By my estimate, victims received \$400 million and the trial lawyers got the rest.

Unfortunately, Pennsylvania did not get the job done. Several legislators accuse the Philadelphia Archdiocese of putting its brake on the legislative process. Both bills (2286 and 2300) languished in the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee and finally died because the legislative session ended in November 2006. House rules prevent representatives from forcing a vote.

I talked with State Rep. Paul Clymer and State Sen. Charles McIlhinney about the prospects for opening the statute of limitations window. What are the chances today?

Paul told me that three of his colleagues introduced bills in the legislative session ending November 2008. And, he's cosponsored them. All sit in the Judiciary Committee chaired by Thomas Caltagirone (D-Berks County). He needs to hear from all citizens if you want action. Call him at 610-376-1529 in Reading.

House Bill 1137 sponsored by Lisa Bennington (Allegheny County) would give a molested person 32 years to take civil action. Douglas Reichley (Lehigh Valley) sponsored House Bill 1574, providing treatment for molested victims. And, Louise Bishop from Philadelphia introduced House Bill 140, which removes the statute of limitations for sex abuse crimes ... period.

Chuck McIlhinney told me that companion bills are in the state Senate Judiciary Committee. "Off the top of my head," he began, "I would open the limitation window but not forever. My first choice would give sex abuse victims five years after the age of consent, 18."

Father Fred Riegler is the pastor of the St. Isidore's

Catholic Church in Quakertown. "I haven't thought things through about removing the statute of limitations forever," he told me last year, "and if no institution is exempt, I'm for it." Father Fred hasn't changed his mind.

The Pennsylvania government, including its 501 school districts, is exempt [from lawsuits], Chuck said.

"There should be no exception," he continued. "A crime's a crime." But, he doubts that legislation without limits to the statute of limitations will pass. "I worry that frivolous law suits would pile up," he said. His colleagues probably agree.

Who would object to opening the window? Father Fred thinks that the public school lobby fears sex abuse lawsuits. So would the insurance lobby, which would have to pay claims incurred by churches and schools.

I listened to "Talk of the Nation" on National Public Radio Nov. 27. According to the Associated Press, more than 2,500 educators in America were punished for sexual misconduct between 2001 and 2005, NPR reported. Robert Shoop, author of "Sexual Exploitation in Schools: How to Spot It, and Stop It," gave compelling arguments for removing the statute of limitations.

Sister Maureen Paul Turlish began her op-ed piece with, "There should be no statute of limitations where the sexual abuse of children is concerned, period." She continued with this criticism of her church. "It is unconscionable that the Archdiocese of Philadelphia apparently is still of the opinion that sexual predators and abusers should not be held accountable.

"Why isn't the archdiocese distributing postcards for the members of the Catholic community to sign and send to their legislators in Harrisburg to support the complete removal of statutes of limitations going forward in regard to the sexual abuse of children, criminally and civilly?" she asked.

"There should be no accommodation in law giving more protection to individuals who have been accused of the sexual abuse of children than to the victims themselves," Sister Maureen added.

It seems so obvious to me. Why won't institutions like the public schools and the Catholic Church pressure passage of these bills?

Unfortunately, it's all about protecting the cash.



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