The Clerical Sex Abuse Scandal: What Parents Can Do, and How to Talk with Kids

The latest flare-up of the ongoing clerical sex abuse scandal has added a new item to parents' safety checklists. Besides teaching kids to look both ways before crossing the street and what to do in a fire, today's parents are wondering what they need to do to protect their kids from becoming the victim of sexual abuse.

And Catholic parents have an added challenge: What to tell kids about the clerical sex abuse scandal, and how to explain it in a way that doesn't undermine their faith.

Telling kids nothing might be the easy answer, and for children, that's probably the way to go—for now.

But if our kids continue to practice their faith into young adulthood, they're going to be challenged by the scandal sooner or later. And if parents (or other trusted adults) don't help older kids and teens sort out how to be Catholic in the context of the scandal, others will happily provide their own spin on the situation—generally, something along the lines of, "How can you willingly identify with a community whose leaders have a history of enabling the abuse of the young and vulnerable?"

The good news is that Catholic parents are far from powerless in this situation. There are concrete steps parents can take to protect children from abuse, and there are several good ways they can protect the faith of older kids and teens as they come to terms with the reality of the scandal.

What Parents Can Do to Protect Children

Being on the front lines of protecting children from sexual abuse is a responsibility few parents relish. Some choose not to address the issue with their kids because they believe the risk is relatively small. But even if that's true, the actions you take to protect your own kids can help to protect other kids, too.

Here's an inventory of steps you can take.

- **Get educated about child sex abuse.** Do you know how common child sex abuse is? (One in 10 kids will be abused by age 18.) Do you know how many reports prove to be false, or what percentage of kids are abused before age 8? You can get a quick overview of the prevalence of the problem from the **Darkness to Light child sex abuse statistics**.
- **Minimize opportunities for abuse.** Do you know how sexual predators groom potential victims? **Find out, and then take other steps to minimize the opportunity for children to be abused**.
- **Teach children to recognize sexual abuse and to report it.** The Darkness to Light website offers **a short video as well as a handy list of talking points for conversations with children**. Among other things, kids should know that it is "against the rules" for adults to touch them inappropriately—even if that adult is a trusted family friend.
- **Learn to recognize signs that a child is being abused.** Emotional and behavioral signs are more common than physical signs. Sexual behavior and language that are not age-appropriate are also a red flag. (**Get more signs at Darkness to Light**.)
- **Make sure your diocese and parish have implemented the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.** Child sex abuse is hardly unique to

church settings, but you may as well start with your parish and diocese. Have they implemented the requirements of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People? “Parents have the right to insist their parishes and schools are in compliance with the **Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People**,” according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “All parishes and schools should be able to show parents that the clergy, employees, and volunteers who work with children are familiar with the warning signs of offenders, what to do if they have a concern about someone, and how to report suspected abuse. Employees and volunteers who work with children also need to have their backgrounds evaluated so parents can have a reasonable assurance that known offenders are not around their children.” You can find out more at the USCCB’s **Office for Child and Youth Protection**.

- **Make sure other places that have responsibility for your kids are also safe.** Schools, clubs, sports teams, and medical clinics are also potential venues for abuse. Has your child’s school implemented a comprehensive sexual abuse policy—including a policy minimizing kids being one-on-one with adults? Have the staff been trained to recognize predatory behavior, the signs of abuse, and what steps to take? If not, step up and insist your school or organization implement such policies.
- **Don’t be afraid to speak up, even to Church leaders.** Under Church law, you have not only the right, but the responsibility to bring concerns about Church matters to the attention of the clergy (see **Canon Law 208-222**, and especially 212), especially when those matters concern the needs and welfare of the laity.

Talking to Older Kids and Teens about the Abuse Scandal

There's no reason not to be completely upfront about the scandal with mature older kids and teens. Explaining the situation to them honestly and forthrightly will help them come to terms with that reality in the light of their own faith, and answer challenges from friends and critics who see the scandal as a definitive rebuke of Catholicism.

For each of the talking points below, I've included a brief comment on a "bigger picture" of the Church that goes a long way toward helping kids (and adults) continue to participate in the Church with integrity, despite the shortcomings of its leaders. These "big picture" pieces involve more than a one-time conversation, but represent important themes that parents can reinforce with kids and teens over the course of years.

Christ is the point.

First, and most importantly, the sins (and hypocritical behavior) of some Church leaders doesn't change the fundamental truths of the faith. Frank Sheed, the well-known Catholic publisher and apologist, summed it up nicely: "We are not baptized into the hierarchy; do not receive the cardinals sacramentally; will not spend an eternity in the beatific vision of the pope. Christ is the point."

No amount of hypocrisy or sinfulness on the part of Church leaders invalidates the fundamental truth of the Good News—namely, that the same God who made the universe deigned to enter into his creation in order to save it from sin and death in the person Jesus Christ.

The bigger picture: This truth is going to be easier for teens to accept if they already have a strong personal relationship with Christ. A good long-range goal for the parents of younger

kids, then, is to help their children develop that relationship by teaching them to pray from the heart, in a personal way, either verbally or through meditation. It is that living relationship with Christ that keeps us in the Church, not a sense of obligation or the sanctity of its members.

The Church is (still) necessary for salvation.

From beginning to end, the history of salvation teaches us that God intends to save us not individually, but together, as a community. That's why he called the people of Israel to himself, and that's why Jesus gathered a community of disciples. The Church is both the end and the means of God's plan of salvation (**Catechism #778**) in the sense that God wants to unite all of humanity in his love, and he calls on ordinary human beings to participate in that plan. Love of neighbor and love of God are inseparable in God's eyes, and the Church is the first place where we practice that love.

Put in simpler terms for kids, we need one another. Just as the members of a family or a football team work together to achieve a common goal, God gives us the Church to help us achieve the common goal of heaven.

The Church is also the primary place we encounter God "in the flesh." Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments, Christ comes to the People of God, incorporating them into his Body. In this way, the Church is both the place where we encounter the incarnated Christ as well as the sacrament of his presence in the world.

The bigger picture: Teens are going to be better disposed to accept these propositions about the Church if they have actually encountered Christ in and through the Church. A good long-term goal for parents, then, is to help kids understand that the sacraments are a continuation of the Christmas story (God's choice to be "incarnate" in the world). Also, parents

should look for ways to help their kids experience their local church community as a place of loving and supportive relationships.

The bishops are not “the Church.”

How do your kids define “the Church”? For too many adult Catholics (and former Catholics), any reference to “the Church” is synonymous with “the clergy” or the hierarchy. Consequently, many teens and young adults who leave the Church say they do so because of the sins or hypocrisy of “the Church,” when it is really the Church’s leadership that is causing them scandal.

The Church teaches that its structure, including the ordained ministry, is essential to its character. But it most definitely does not teach that the hierarchy is “the Church” by itself. The Church is the entire People of God, all of whom make up the Body of Christ by virtue of their baptism into Christ. Indeed, it is the communion of saints that is the fullest manifestation of the Church.

Savvy teens might object that a few rotten apples spoil the bunch—that by virtue of their authority and power, the bishops’ conduct has an outsized role in shaping the character of the Church.

But is that so? If it is, then the People of God ought to have dispersed thousands of years ago. From beginning to end, and on virtually every page in between, the Bible makes it clear that the leaders of the People of God are far from perfect. Israel’s leaders repeatedly abandoned the Covenant, committed grave sins, and betrayed the people they were supposed to protect. The people Jesus chose to lead the Church weren’t much better: Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, and the rest of the apostles fled at his arrest. And Church history is littered with countless examples of scandals that make the current crisis look tame by comparison.

The Bible may be unique among the sacred texts of world religions for its unrestrained critique of even its most important religious figures. But while honestly and frankly confronting that reality, the Bible also affirms that it is ultimately God who shepherds the People of God—and it is ultimately God who rescues them from the trouble they get into, again and again. Far from being a reason to abandon the community of faith, the failure of some religious leaders is a call for the entire community to repent and recommit itself to God.

The bigger picture: Kids should be thoroughly familiar with the story of the People of God as it is related in the Bible and in the history of the Church—and particularly the lives of the saints. Teens who have read the Bible and discussed it with parents or other adults of mature faith will be less prone to develop an overly idealized picture of Church leaders, nor will the revelation of the sins of Church leaders necessarily be an existential shock that calls their entire faith into question. The stories of the saints—the whole story, not a sanitized version—can be particularly helpful. Many of the Church's most prominent saints experienced pushback, or even persecution, from the Church itself—and yet, because their focus was on Christ, they persevered.

The Church does more good than harm.

One of the sad consequences of the ongoing scandal is that it highlights the Church at its very worst. People who are outside the Church or not actively involved in it often unfairly conclude that sexual abuse, lies, and some bishops' abuse of authority are the dominant themes of Church life.

Those who have been deeply involved in Church life know better. Countless people's lives have been dramatically transformed by their encounter with Christ in the Church, and those people go on to do tremendous good within the Church, their communities, and the world. Over the centuries, those

people have been at the forefront of promoting human rights and dignity, and pioneered and founded the institutions that western civilization now takes for granted, from banks to hospitals to universities and universal primary schooling.

More specifically, it's worth pointing out to kids that abusive clergy are the exception rather than the norm. Most priests, bishops, and vowed religious have genuinely dedicated their lives to serving the People of God, often at great sacrifice. The effect that the sex abuse scandal has on their reputation by mere association is unfair, at best.

The bigger picture: Kids who are involved in parish life in a variety of ways will know firsthand that the Church tends to be a positive, healing force for most people. And kids who are involved in parish-based ministries and charitable activities will see how the People of God, at their best, can be a real force for good in the world.

Similarly, kids should develop (appropriate) personal relationships with priests, other clergy, and vowed religious. Such relationships are the best evidence kids can get that abusive and irresponsible clergy are the exception, not the norm. Plus, our clergy and religious appreciate the support and encouragement of young people and their families.

Hope, Kindness, and the Need for Prayer and Fasting

The revelations around the sex abuse scandal may have grave consequences for the Church in the United States for a generation or more. On the other hand, our faith teaches us that we must confess our sins in order to be healed of them—and God is always ready to heal us. In the long run, the process of confronting systemic misconduct within the hierarchy of the Church lays the necessary foundation for forgiveness and healing, and that is cause for hope.

In the meantime, I think it's imperative for us to be kind to

one another, and in particular to members of the clergy, who are more deeply affected by the scandal on a day-to-day basis than the laity are. They need the active support and encouragement of Catholic families.

Finally, one of the more hopeful aspects of the crisis has been the spontaneous, lay-led movement to practice prayer and fasting for the Church's healing. Those calling for prayer and fasting cite Mark 9:29, in which Jesus tells the disciples that some types of demons can only be cast out "by prayer and fasting."

Prayer and fasting may not be the only way that the laity need to respond to the McCarrick scandal, but it's a good start.

Together, let's pray for the Church and its leaders.