

Release of Cardinal George's deposition revealing

Deposition release called a 'milestone'

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When [Cardinal Francis George](#) released his deposition on the [sexual abuse scandal](#) last week, he offered an unprecedented look into the Roman Catholic Church's shameful actions and also into his own mind.

Many Catholics were appalled to learn the cardinal worked to reduce the 20-year prison sentence of a convicted child molester, Norbert Maday.

Others were infuriated by evidence of his repeated refusal to follow recommendations and promptly remove abusive Chicago priests from ministry.

In his own words throughout the testimony, he often appeared deeply conflicted between his concern for children and his duty to defend accused priests.

Even so, some who have advised the U.S. bishops on the scandal said the cardinal's agreement to make his deposition public could prompt a significant shift in the church hierarchy's thinking.

As president of the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), George is the most influential leader in the American church and only the third American cardinal to be deposed in sex-abuse litigation. He is the first to voluntarily release a transcript.

"The reason this scandal was as devastating as it was, was there wasn't transparency in the beginning, not because they were coddling criminals, although that was the impact," said Robert Bennett, a [Washington, D.C.](#), lawyer and former member of the National Review Board, a watchdog panel of Catholics formed by U.S. bishops in 2002.

"The church with all its wonderful qualities—one of its not so wonderful qualities is its adherence to secrecy, which has certainly contributed to the problem."

The deposition was released Tuesday by the Chicago archdiocese as part of a \$12.7 million settlement involving 16 victims and 11 priests. During eight hours of questioning on Jan. 30, the

cardinal revealed missteps in the cases of Maday, Daniel McCormack and Joseph Bennett.

In the deposition, George also traced his growing awareness of clergy sexual abuse as he rose through the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church.

After George entered the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Vatican released a document in 1962 regarding the solicitation of sex inside confessionals.

In that document, the Holy See called on priests to confide in Rome when they discovered a clergy colleague had asked for sex before, during or after hearing an account of a parishioner's sins. But it wasn't until the mid-1980s that he first heard an allegation of a priest who had abused a minor.

The magnitude of the crisis became clear in 2002 when the sexual abuse scandal revealed that dozens of abusive priests had been left in ministry, only to become serial predators. Prior to that, any priest with allegations against him was allowed to remain in partial or restricted posts.

"I think in the studies that I read after 2002 I came to that conclusion for the first time," George said in the deposition. "All those formed in my mind the conviction that the recidivism rate was too great to ever chance allowing someone to recommit this crime."

But by the time he became Chicago's archbishop in 1997, George had apparently become convinced sexual abuse was mostly a thing of the past.

He couldn't fathom a Daniel McCormack. When McCormack was arrested in January 2006, George said: "We thought this was done, or at least contained," referring to clergy sexual abuse. "This is something that I have to live with because it's a terrible crime and it was on my watch," he said in the deposition.

The impact of the cardinal's recent action remains unclear. Some hope it will inspire other prelates to follow his lead, thereby restoring trust and inviting parishioners once violated by their priests to reconcile with their childhood church.

"While it's a milestone on one hand, the road ahead is very long," said Timothy Lytton, an Albany Law School professor who wrote "Holding Bishops Accountable: How Lawsuits Helped the Catholic Church Confront Clergy Sexual Abuse."

"The cardinal's rhetoric about protecting victims and showing compassion to perpetrators and pastoral concern for incarcerated priests omits the theme on people's minds," Lytton said. "That theme is: What is the institutional church going to do to hold officials accountable?"

Victims advocates remain cautious and say change can only come by disciplining those officials who covered up for abusive priests.

In the deposition, George disclosed that the vicar for priests, Rev. Edward D. Grace, and Auxiliary Bishop George J. Rassas withheld information about abuse allegations.

Grace coached Joseph Bennett on how to handle questions involving a victim's knowledge of Bennett's private parts, according to a memo included in the deposition. Grace also advised McCormack not to talk to police when first arrested in August 2005, the cardinal said.

"History has shown that very little changes the behavior of the hierarchy," said David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"But history has also shown that exposing secrets does protect kids, prompts victims to come forward and prods Catholics and citizens to look at religious figures with a much healthier skepticism," Clohessy said. "Real change could come about if the cardinal demoted church officials who concealed abuse."

[Illinois Supreme Court](#) Justice Anne Burke said she was not surprised by the cardinal's decision and commends it as a step in the right direction.

"He's a man who takes time to think things through," said Burke, former head of the bishops' National Review Board.

"I knew he would come to this eventually. Because all the facts are there that would bring him to it. It's hard to deny them."

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