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JUDGE WRONG TO SEAL GRAND JURY TESTIMONY IN CATHOLIC SEX ABUSE CASE

Covering up the cover-up

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The just-released grand jury testimony of Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua shines a light on the warped thinking that has [allowed the priest sexual abuse scandal to fester for decades](#), while victims are left to fend for themselves. A prosecutor asked Bevilacqua why he allowed a priest with a lengthy and disturbing record of sexual abuse to remain in active duty. Bevilacqua's response: because a priest "has rights."

Yes, your Eminence, but what about the kids?

Indeed, priests have rights and are presumed innocent just like any other citizen. There should be an impartial investigation. If charges are filed, they should receive a fair trial before a jury of their peers. But they do not have the right to sexually abuse kids; get moved from parish to parish; and not have to answer for their actions. And their bosses have no right to aid in the cover-up.

Sadly, that's exactly what happened during Bevilacqua's reign of error.

Take the priest that Bevilacqua told grand jurors "has rights." He was accused of raping and impregnating an 11-year-old girl and molesting another child in a confessional. In all, that priest allegedly assaulted eight victims.

At some point Bevilacqua and other higher-ups in the Roman Catholic Church that extends to the Vatican needed to say we must get to the bottom of this mess and stop enabling these monsters. Instead, the church's approach has been to ignore,

dodge, cover up, and discredit victims. Above all else: deny, deny, deny. If all else fails, scratch out a check to an occasional victim when complete confidentiality is required.

Bevilacqua's testimony sounded like he was more afraid of the predator priests than of protecting abused children. "If we tried to remove him, he could bring action," the cardinal testified. That defense is an insult.

Two grand juries all but accused Bevilacqua of wrongdoing. A grand jury in 2005 said he "excused and enabled" sexual abuse by priests. The second grand jury in 2011 said the abuse was "known, tolerated, and hidden by high church officials, up to and including the cardinal himself." Statute of limitations prevented the 2005 grand jury from charging Bevilacqua and top aides with crimes. The 2011 grand jury said: "We would like to hold Cardinal Bevilacqua accountable."

In many ways, the cover-up is just as bad as the crimes. But Bevilacqua, 88, has dodged responsibility. He retired in 2003 and is said to be suffering from cancer and dementia.

Bevilacqua's successor, Cardinal Justin Rigali, continued the cover-up and did little to root out problem priests. The second grand jury report released in February found as many as 37 priests remained in active ministry despite accusations against them of sexual abuse or other inappropriate behavior with minors.

Rigali initially responded to the February report with a fancy tap dance of legal language that said there were no active priests "who have an admitted or established allegation of sexual abuse of a minor against them." The response further angered Catholics who are sick and tired of being misled and lied to by church leaders. It further showed how the church remains in denial of the crimes and continues the cover-up. (To his credit, Rigali later apologized and the Archdiocese suspended 21 priests, but further damage to the church was done.)

It's unlikely Rigali's incoming replacement, Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver, will be any more aggressive when it comes to rooting out problem priests. Chaput is a staunch defender of church policies and has fought legislative efforts in Denver to pass laws that would give victims time to file civil claims where the statute of limitations has expired.

Indeed, the cover-up efforts by the church go all the way to the Vatican and are not limited to Philadelphia. The only church leaders who get promoted appear to be the hard-liners who maintain the cover-up.

That's all the more reason why Common Pleas Court Judge Lillian Ransom was wrong on Monday to seal the recently released grand jury testimony by Archdiocesan officials. Bevilacqua, Rigali and other church leaders have shown they can't honestly address the priest abuse scandal that continues to roil the church.

God's sunlight remains the best disinfectant.

Paul Davies spent 25 years in the newspaper business, including stops at the Daily News, the Inquirer and the Wall Street Journal.

http://blogs.phillymag.com/the_philly_post/2011/07/27/judge-wrong-seal-grand-jury-testimony-catholic-sex-abuse-case/