

A proactive approach to rooting out harassment in U.S. seminaries

The summer of 2018 – [three years ago, now](#) – was not the best summer for the Catholic Church in the United States, to say the least. Late July and early August saw the release of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report on predatory priests in six Pennsylvania dioceses as well as the news of credible allegations against former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, many of which were based on complaints of men who had experienced abuse and harassment as seminarians.

By mid-August the level of anger, frustration and sadness felt by many members of the lay faithful, and many clergy as well, was very high. I remember one very prominent Catholic benefactor recommending that we all pick one weekend and boycott Mass and the offertory collection with it. I pointed out that this would put us all in the state of grave sin for missing Mass. My friend acknowledged this, but the fact that he was ready to brave hell out of frustration shows how paralyzed and angry people felt.

I myself remember sitting in a pew in St. Matthew's Cathedral in South Bend on the feast of the Assumption with the same feelings of anger and sadness coursing through me. But at the same time, another feeling, just as deep, surged up, and that was gratitude – gratitude for the fidelity of the Church that had preserved this feast over so many centuries, and so faithfully that it had even reached me today, here in this impossibly remote backwater (from the point of view of fifth-century Constantinople!). I also felt gratitude for a Church self-assured enough to have required me to be there that day!

Out of this gratitude came the desire to help in some way,

and, in consultation with advisers, we at the McGrath Institute for Church Life here at the University of Notre Dame decided to [commission a study](#) of the prevalence, or lack thereof, of sexual misconduct and harassment in U.S. Catholic seminaries and houses of religious formation. We worked with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University to design and implement a survey. About half of the U.S. seminaries agreed to participate in this first-ever study, designed with the intention of counteracting, with fact, the wild rumors that had been circulating about the prevalence of sexual misconduct in seminary cultures. In fact, when the results were released in June 2019, the incidence of sexual harassment at seminaries was found to be significantly lower than many people had been expecting, though there clearly was work yet to be accomplished. (The report can be found online at mcgrath.nd.edu/resources/).

But for our purposes, the most significant finding was that less than half of those claiming they had experienced sexual harassment had reported their experience, and of those, less than half were confident their report had been taken fully seriously or that the policies had worked efficaciously. Seminarians often commented, too, that policies were unclear or not well known. This data indicated to us a further step we could take in helping to reduce the likelihood of sexual harassment or misconduct at seminaries. What about developing a national protocol for the reporting and prevention of sexual harassment and misconduct?

To explore this idea, the McGrath Institute convened a group of seasoned seminary rectors, bishops with experience in seminary leadership or the equivalent, seminary faculty and lay persons with applicable expertise, to consider drafting such a protocol. The teamwork of this group was itself a kind of inspiring experience in what Pope Benedict XVI called “co-responsibility” for the mission of the Church.

Ultimately, given the various local situations and jurisdictions in which seminaries find themselves, a one-size-fits-all protocol seemed unworkable. Instead, the group developed the idea of “benchmarks” that would be characteristic of an effective policy and that could be incorporated into local policies by the institutions themselves.

These benchmarks include, most importantly, the provision of a reporting structure independent of the seminary itself or of the authority (for example, diocesan) overseeing the seminary, as well as benchmarks concerned with systematic training, victim support, with developing a culture pro-actively alert for infractions, and with “portability,” meaning that the policies would apply even in field placement assignments and the like, outside of the seminary. (Full text of the benchmarks can be found [at the McGrath Center website](#).) The benchmarks were eventually given a positive assessment by the USCCB Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, in a statement that can be accessed at the website given just above.

Our idea in publishing the benchmarks was based on the hope that we could get seminaries and houses of religious formation to commit publicly to having or developing policies that fully embodied all five of the benchmarks. The names of the 19 seminaries that have so far made this public commitment are given on the website mentioned above, along with the names of the members of the McGrath Seminary Study Group, as we have been calling it. We are hoping that many more seminaries will be willing to sign on. Often in the past, the Church has found itself in the position of rear-guard action, as it were, reacting to scandals as they are made public and making statements about commitment to change.

We thought as a group that it would be great, when and if a fresh grand jury report from another state, or some other source of scandal is revealed, the Church could say we already

are doing something and we are committed to continuing. Bishops and priests could point to how many seminaries are publicly committed to effective prevention and reporting policies and to how the conversation is ongoing.

Our group noticed that we as a Church can get complacent during lulls in what seems to be an ongoing crisis. We will be in a stronger and more credible position if we are really engaged in significant projects of ongoing reform, such that, in five years when, hopefully, we are able to conduct a second national survey, we will find our work has borne fruit in even lower levels of abuse and harassment in our seminaries and houses of formation. This would be a fitting tribute to so many people who have contributed so much good work over so many years of faithful service in education and forming successive generations of priests for our beloved Church.

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