

BIAS MARKS PHILLY COVERAGE

In February, a Philadelphia grand jury released a report going after the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for sheltering priests accused of sexual abuse. This report followed a grand jury investigation in 2005 which also went after the archdiocese, but came up empty. No other institution was targeted by either grand jury; they simply were focused on the Catholic Church.

Following the release of the most recent grand jury report, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran an editorial singling out the archdiocese to make public its files on priests accused of sex abuse and called upon lawmakers to make it easier for past alleged victims to sue. What it failed to mention is that nowhere is there less of a problem of sex abuse than in the Catholic Church. Indeed, in 2009 only 6 credible accusations were made against over 40,000 priests.

Its dishonesty was remarkable. It never called for any other institution to open its files on accused employees.

After a few weeks, there was still the impression that the archdiocese was guilty of sheltering abusive priests which led to outrageous comments by agenda-driven lawyers, professional victims' groups and pundits. After looking at the facts, it is clear that the Catholic Church never had a monopoly on this problem.

We looked at the numbers and it became clear that the problem in Philadelphia was being overstated.

Beginning in 2003, 61 cases of priestly misconduct were examined by the archdiocese. 24 were dismissed because the accusations could not be substantiated. Of the 37 remaining cases, three priests were suspended immediately following the recent grand jury report and 21 additional priests were suspended. As for the rest, eight were found not to have a credible accusation made against them; one has been on leave

for some time; two are incapacitated and no longer in ministry; and two more belong to religious orders outside the archdiocese.

This means the majority of the priests didn't have a single credible accusation made against them (the initial 24 plus the eight newly absolved, or 32 of 61). Moreover, none of the 24 who were suspended had been found guilty of anything. To top things off, the charges against them include such matters as "boundary issues" and "inappropriate behavior," terms so elastic as to indict almost anyone.

Just as it is important not to understate the problem, it is important not to overstate it. Neither the archdiocese, nor the media, has been particularly clear about offering a concise, disaggregated tally. The confusion is complicated because the public assumes that not only are all of these priests guilty, but that they are all guilty of a serious offense.

What got lost in the discussion were the constitutionally protected due process rights of accused priests. The rush to judgment is especially despicable in a day and age when accused Muslims are more likely to be presumed innocent than accused Catholic priests. And they aren't being detained because of "boundary issues."