

EXONERATED PRIEST STILL BRANDED

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on a Tulsa priest who has been exonerated:

On December 3, the Associated Press (AP) ran a story on a Tulsa priest who was allowed to return to work after an internal investigation found that an allegation of sexual abuse against him was unsubstantiated. Many of those media outlets and watchdog groups that initially reported on the allegations have not reported on his exoneration.

Fr. Joe Townsend of the Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma was put on administrative leave in July after it was alleged that he acted improperly when he was an associate pastor at St. Pius X Catholic Church from 1988 to 1991. He denied the accusation of sexual misconduct and no criminal charges were ever brought. Now the diocese has cleared him altogether.

It has been a week since the AP story was published, and among the media outlets that reported the allegation, but not the exoneration, are KOCO (the ABC affiliate in Oklahoma City) and KFSM (the CBS affiliate in Springdale, Arkansas). Even more disturbing has been the reaction of BishopAccountability, a watchdog internet site that monitors priests accused of sexual misconduct.

In August, BishopAccountability posted four different articles on its "Abuse Tracker" about Fr. Townsend. In October, it said the investigation was ongoing. But there has been no posting about him being cleared by an internal investigation.

The public has become increasingly skeptical about the media, and as we recently learned from an NBC survey of Catholics who work for the Church, they don't trust the reporting on clergy sexual abuse. Stories like this are why.

Many in the media rely on BishopAccountability as a source of information. But it is not reliable. It is not just Fr. Townsend who has been treated unfairly by this watchdog group—it has routinely smeared priests who have been exonerated by failing to post the final outcome.

There is an AP story today about priests feeling beleaguered. Add Fr. Townsend to that list. Standing up for the rights of accused priests takes guts in our society today. Unfortunately, few are up to the task, including those in Catholic circles.