

Fr. Benedict Groeschel Responds to his Critics

(Catalyst 5/2003)

Father Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R. is a good friend of the Catholic League. On March 2, the *Dallas Morning News* published an article about him titled, "Priest plays down abuse crisis while helping clergy keep jobs." It was written by Brooks Egerton, a staff writer for the *News*; he is also the past chairman of the Texas chapter of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association. The article was reprinted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on March 23. Another article critical of Father Groeschel was written by Maya Kremen; it appeared in the Paterson, NJ *Herald News* on March 4.

Father Groeschel has responded to the articles and we are reprinting his answers point by point to set the record straight. We have taken the liberty of splicing his remarks so that the point-counterpoint context is readily understandable.

Dallas Morning News: *In the world according to Father Benedict Groeschel, the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal is largely the stuff of fiction. Reporters "doing the work of Satan" are driven to lie, the New York priest says, because they hate the church's moral teachings.*

Fr. Benedict: I do stand by my statement that the secular media have taken the scandal out of proportion, ignored many charges of abuse of minors and committed by others in professional roles, created the impression that this is only a problem of Catholic clergy. Writers as varied as George Weigel, Philip Jenkins, Andrew Greeley, Richard Neuhaus and Peter Steinfels have all been critical of the media coverage of these scandals.

DMN: *The Franciscan friar's base is a mansion on Long Island Sound, where he runs the Archdiocese of New York's spiritual development office and Trinity Retreat Center for clergy.*

BG: I have not been the director of Trinity Retreat for ten years. This retreat for priests has never been referred to before as a mansion. In fact, I don't even live in the building. I have lived for years in the garage.

DMN: *According to his own written account, he has counseled hundreds of his brethren and "happily, 85 priests have returned to the active ministry."*

BG: Egerton mentions that 85 priests have returned to the active ministry through Trinity Retreat, implying that some of these priests had difficulties with minors. These were priests on leaves of absence, not priests who had been accused of any misbehavior at all.

DMN: *Father Groeschel... declined interview requests.*

BG: I did not decline to be interviewed. I never spoke to Mr. Egerton because I was not at home when he called.

DMN: *Dallas Bishop Charles Grahmann has allowed one of his priests, removed from parish work after the diocese concluded he had abused a girl, to help manage the retreat center in recent years. That priest, the Rev. Richard T. Brown, moved to a hermitage a few months ago...*

BG: Fr. Richard Brown never assisted in the management of Trinity Retreat. He did typing and recorded reservations for priests coming on retreat. He lived a most prayerful and ascetical life while here and he had done so for many years before as many people have said. He did no pastoral work in the New York Archdiocese, nor did anyone ever request permission for him to do so.

DMN: Leaders of the neighboring Diocese of Paterson, N.J., one of several that sent business to Father Groeschel, blamed three “unfortunate” reassignments on his advice.

Letter from Marianna Thompson, Director of Communications, Diocese of Paterson, to the Herald-News: I never used the word “blame” in my conversations with the Dallas Morning News. The diocesan focus in this issue is not to cast blame on others....

DMN: “It just burns me to no end,” said Buddy Cotton, who has accused the Rev. James Hanley of abusing him in the Paterson Diocese and recently called Bishop Rodimer to complain about Father Groeschel.

BG: [From a letter to the Herald News 3/3/03] I had nothing to do with the reappointment of James Hanley to another parish after he was removed from Mendham as a result of serious accusations of abuse of minors. In fact, I had never heard of the case. I became involved when Hanley came on retreat after he was removed a second time from a new assignment.

DMN: A psychologist who evaluated Father [Morgan] Kuhl for federal prosecutors recommended that he “be enrolled in a program specific to sex offenders,” not just in the general psychotherapy and spiritual counseling he was getting.... U.S. District Judge Anne Thompson initially sentenced Father Kuhl to a short prison term followed by house arrest. But she later reduced the penalty, over the objections of prosecutor Donna Krappa, to five years of probation and ordered the priest to “adhere to the program requirements at Trinity Retreat.”

In advocating probation, Father Groeschel represented himself to the court as a counseling psychologist, Ms. Krappa said in an interview. New York state officials said he has never had the license generally required for use of that title. Using the title without a license is a misdemeanor, state officials said.

BG: I can say Morgan Kuhl never received any treatment from me and was in fact directly enrolled in a formal treatment program elsewhere. We provided a supervised residence, which the court agreed to continue.

As to the issue of my not having a license: a Doctor of Psychology does not need a license unless he is receiving third part payments for instance from an insurance company or an agency. I never intended to receive any pay doing psychological counseling or spiritual direction, so I never bothered about a license. In fact I have never been paid a cent for my services that Mr. Egerton refers to as "business." It is not uncommon for professors of psychology not to obtain licenses to practice, because clinical practice is not our principal vocation.

BG: [To the *Herald News*] I am at a great disadvantage in defending myself because of the right of confidentiality of the people involved. I have worked as a therapist and spiritual director with clergy for 30 years after obtaining a doctorate in Counseling Psychology at Columbia University. I have never charged a fee and have never asked for or received payment. I have seen clergy of various different denominations and faiths. Like any therapist I have made mistakes. People forget that therapists and spiritual directors are neither prosecutors nor defense attorneys. Since I cannot defend myself, I think that any honest person will admit that what has been said against me is unfair and based on misinformation. Being a strong advocate of Church reform does not make you popular—but Jesus did not suggest that we would be popular if we try to follow Him.

CLOSING COMMENTS BY FATHER GROESCHEL:

Since the accusations came out, I contacted each of the priests involved and obtained their permission to state publicly that I neither evaluated nor treated them. They were all treated in very well-known professional programs and their

placements were based on the joint decisions of well-known psychiatrists, psychologists and mental health professionals. At the suggestion of Cardinal O'Connor, we offered the Trinity Retreat as a place of retreat, prayer, penance and rehabilitation to priests. I often passed on the written recommendation of other mental health professionals.

WILLIAM DONOHUE OFFERED THESE REMARKS:

Father Benedict Groeschel is a courageous and brilliant priest who has given his life to the Catholic Church. Only those who seek to undermine Catholicism would ever lash out at him. And when they do, the Catholic League will not hesitate to rush to his defense.

Father Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., is the Director of the Office for Spiritual Development of the New York Archdiocese and a founding member of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal.