

SNAP EXPOSED: UNMASKING THE SURVIVORS NETWORK OF THOSE ABUSED BY PRIESTS

Special Report by William Donohue

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The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) held a national conference in Washington, D.C., July 8-10. This report details what happened.

Over the past decade, Catholics have been rocked by revelations of priestly abuse. Bad judgments were made; cover-ups took place; and inexcusable conduct was tolerated. Much of the criticism has been constructive, and to that extent, welcomed. But some has been malicious. There is a profound difference between reasoned criticism and irrational assaults on the Catholic Church. What happened at the SNAP event clearly fell in the latter category.

Catholics understand the anger that many have about the way things were handled in some dioceses. When anger becomes a pattern, however, it can consume. Indeed, it can blur one's vision, leading to irrational and wholly indefensible accusations. This is precisely what has happened to SNAP, and to its allies. Logic, reason and evidence no longer matter: what matters is payback. Make no mistake about it; SNAP has decided to wage war on the Catholic Church.

There are many good reasons why the proceedings of the SNAP conference should concern Catholics, but none is more salient than the precarious state of due process rights for priests. A hostile climate is evident in many parts of the country, so much so that prosecutors, judges and juries are not inclined to see accused priests as innocent. This is due, in no small way, to the pressure being applied by professional victims'

groups and their sister organizations, as well as their allies in law and the media. It does not exaggerate to say that there is a vested ideological and economic interest in putting the worst possible face on the Catholic Church these days. This conference being Exhibit A.

SNAP bills itself as "the largest, oldest and most active support group for women and men wounded by religious authority figures (priests, ministers, bishops, deacons, nuns and others)." In fact, it rarely deals with ministers, and there are few "others." Almost all of its work is directed at the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, it has succeeded in getting others to believe its propaganda. To wit: the recent John Jay College report on the "Causes and Context" of priestly sexual abuse said that "SNAP has developed into a national movement of support for victims of sexual abuse by any church leader and, more recently, all victims of sexual abuse by any person in a position of authority." Not true. As if more evidence were needed, the *entire* SNAP conference was focused exclusively on priests and the Catholic Church.

The information about the SNAP conference contained in this report was provided by individuals who were there. They have impeccable credentials and are a trusted source. What they saw and heard is disturbing, and not just to those who are grateful for all the good work that Catholic priests have done, and continue to do: any fair-minded person would be just as taken aback by what occurred. Imbued with rage, most of the presentations had all the markings of a people possessed by revenge. Their goal has less to do with helping victims than it does in punishing the Catholic Church.

What follows is an account of the SNAP conference as it was related to me by persons who attended the event. [In describing some of the speakers, biographical and other information was added.] Not all of the break-out sessions were monitored, and not all of those which were monitored are mentioned. The major presentations, of course, are covered,

and direct quotes are occasionally offered. While some of the presentations were informational, others were more in the vein of an agit-prop workshop straight out of the 1960s. The latter proved to be quite revealing.

There were approximately 110-130 people in attendance at the conference. All were white and approximately 60% were female (one male wore a Voice of the Faithful T-shirt). The ages ranged from about 40-75; the majority were 55-65. Attendees were seated according to the state in which they reside; only a few were represented.

The recurring theme of the conference was the evil nature of the Catholic Church. The word "evil" was used repeatedly to describe "the institution." There was no presumption of innocence: accused priests were spoken of as if they were guilty, and this was true of all the speakers, including the attorneys.

Christine Courtois made a presentation, "Relational and Betrayal Trauma," that offered a "psychological analysis" of the impact of sexual abuse. The seminaries, the psychologist said, were a "breeding ground" of sexual activity and abuse. In keeping with the established narrative, she denied the role of homosexuality in the abuse scandal, opting to blame pedophilia. Without offering any evidence, she remarkably created a new class of victims: she contended that "therapists are vicariously traumatized" by their own patients.

An "Overview of the Philadelphia Grand Jury Reports" was offered by William Spade. He was an Assistant District Attorney in the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office from 1995-2004. His relationship with Catholicism is eclectic. "I don't like the institution," he allows, "but I like the faith."

Cardinal Justin Rigali, the outgoing Archbishop of Philadelphia, was described by Spade as a "cagey and wily" guy

who made a “cagey move” to replace the Secretary of the Clergy position in the archdiocese with a review board comprised of priests. But there is nothing “cagey” about adopting the same panel that almost all the other dioceses have adopted. No matter, to Spade, the review board was simply a “legal buffer” that allowed Cardinal Rigali to “shield himself from legal liability in priest abuse cases.” Of course, had Rigali chosen not to establish such a board—breaking ranks with most of the other bishops—he would have been pilloried for doing so.

When Spade was in the D.A.’s office, the man he wanted to get more than anyone else was Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, the former Archbishop of Philadelphia (they always go after the top cleric). To Spade’s chagrin, he noted that Bevilacqua was able to escape again and again. He did not say why he always failed. After striking pay dirt, Spade went into private practice. What he drew from his experience, he told the audience, was that the best way to prosecute the Catholic Church was at the federal level.

Despite what Spade said, Cardinal Bevilacqua would have been irresponsible had he not demanded evidence when allegations were made against his priests. Isn’t that what all employers would do? Spade told the gathering that he didn’t like it when Bevilacqua said he needed more in the way of proof before asking accused priests to step down. This just goes to show how thin the evidence has to be before lawyers like Spade jump to conclusions.

Spade also told the conference that Bevilacqua has moved from the “palatial quarters” of the seminary to his niece’s “estate” in Bucks County. Indeed, he claimed that both the niece and her husband are physicians and have “concocted” a diagnosis of dementia in order to help him escape indictment. Naturally, not one of the attendees pressed him to offer evidence of this matter.

When it comes to attorneys who have made a career out of suing

the Catholic Church, Jeffrey Anderson has no equal. The Minnesota lawyer was raised as a Lutheran. But that didn't work out so he became a Catholic. Then he became an atheist. Not just an ordinary one—he became a self-described “dedicated atheist.” Then he had another conversion: last year he described himself as “deeply religious.” His religious convictions, however, proved not to be too deep, which is why he is now touted as an “agnostic.”

Anderson has had a checkered life in more ways than one. A hippie who dropped out of college, he sold shoes after finally graduating from the University of Minnesota. He didn't have an easy time at William Mitchell College of Law, but the diminutive 5'4" activist was emboldened when, in his last year in school, he won a highly questionable case: he successfully defended a homeless black man who urinated in a church, charging that the white and wealthy churchgoers were racist. Then he went on to bigger things, such as defending accused murderers and gay activists fighting bathhouse raids.

A recovering alcoholic, he claims his daughter was molested by a therapist when she was eight. While he has no history of exhibiting a vendetta against therapists, he has a long, and profitable, record of suing the Catholic Church. In one settlement alone, he netted half a billion dollars; he regularly collects upwards of 40 percent from each settlement. Not surprisingly, the lion's share of his work is directed at the Catholic Church.

Anderson led a legal panel at the conference that included Church-suing attorneys Jeffrey Herman and Mitchell Garabedian. Virtually the entire session was devoted to discussing the legal impediments to suing the Church. The biggest problem, they said, was the way the statute of limitations differed from state to state. Never once was it even hinted at that these statutes were written to protect the constitutional rights of the accused. Without due process, civil liberties are a sham. Yet to these trial lawyers, they are nothing but

an unfair intrusion on their work. For Anderson, in particular, eliminating the statute of limitations is a vital weapon. In fact, he wants to see this happen *globally*, making it easier to sue the Catholic Church around the world.

This mindset is not above entertaining cabals. "The USCCB [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops] is aligned with the Republican party and insurance companies," and together they are "actively lobbying against changing the statute of limitations around the country." Of course, no evidence was presented to support this absurd claim. More hyperventilation surfaced when it was observed that settlements with the Church are still taking place, and confidentiality clauses are still being used. This raises the question: why would those who purport to be interested in justice have a problem with alleged victims who settle out of court? Thus do they give their real hand away. Then came the roar, "DO NOT GET GAGGED!"

When Anderson said that the lawsuits are not about the money, he was speaking honestly. To be sure, money is a major motivator for his clients. But greed is not what fires him. No, what inspires him, and those of his ilk, is something deeper, something money can't buy. Hatred. That's the only way to understand why Anderson continues to file suit after suit against the Vatican—nothing would make him happier than to bring down the pope. Even though Anderson continues to lose, the outside chance that he might get the pope is enough to get his juices going.

Garabedian, a Boston attorney, isn't interested in balancing the scales of justice: he wants to go for the kill. "This immoral entity, the Catholic Church, should be defeated. We must stand up and defeat this evil." That's exactly what he told the true believers. Candid statements like this give the lie to the argument that those who routinely bring suits against the Church are doing so out of fidelity to the law. Nonsense. What drives them is not outreach to alleged victims—what ignites them is the satisfaction of going after

the Catholic Church. I learned this first-hand when I recently called Garabedian asking if he had any remorse after a spurious lawsuit he filed against a fine priest was tossed by the judge. What prompted my call was the revelation that the priest, though never found guilty of anything, died a broken man—this was the attorney's second lawsuit against him!

Garabedian not only showed no remorse, he went ballistic when questioned.

A breakout session, "The Culture of Narcissism and the Spirituality of Reform," featuring Richard Sipe, Marianne Benkert and Tom Doyle, was the most incendiary of them all. Indeed, it was so bad that the anger was described as "off-the-charts." Here is another description of what transpired: "Each presenter in this session exhibited a very high level of hatred and anger towards the Church. They exhibited a visceral, deep-seated hatred of the Church." The persons who offered this commentary, it should be noted, are not given to hyperbole, making their report all the more disturbing.

Sipe is a former Benedictine monk who has been ripping the Church for years. He bluntly told the crowd, "The Church is corrupt." Worse, he opined, "Abuse is only the tip of the iceberg." He did not allude to what was next. Without evidence, he claimed that "six to nine percent of priests are involved in the sexual abuse of minors." The cause of molestation, he alleged, is narcissism. "Narcissism is embedded in the clerical culture that produces sexual abuse." No attempt was made to explain why self-absorbed people are more likely to be molesters, as opposed to, say, thieves. Random assertions like this went uncontested throughout the conference.

Benkert, a psychiatrist, is also a proponent of the narcissism thesis. She maintained there are many ways in which the Church manifests this trait, among them being the following: the Church refuses to acknowledge sin; it engages in scapegoating;

it sacrifices others; it is a master of disguise and pretense; it fosters intellectual deviousness; it lies; it forces the faithful to submit their will to the Church; it is controlling; it causes "religious duress"; etc. She stressed that the narcissist is the personification of evil. "It can be evil in a person or in an institution," suggesting we are dealing either with evil priests or the evil Catholic Church. Finally, she told the gathering, "Sue the Church because they understand money; they are not empathetic."

It was sad to learn that the worst anti-Catholic rant of the day was delivered by Thomas Doyle, an ordained Dominican priest. The recovering alcoholic has butted heads with bishops before, and after one such confrontation he was removed from a military chaplain post. He also likes to blame Pope John Paul II for the abuse scandal. At the conference, Doyle spewed out every anti-Catholic canard possible. Here are a few examples:

- The Church was established by Constantine—not Jesus Christ.
- The Church = fear, power, and guilt.
- The Church is inauthentic and there is a "toxic religiosity" in this institution. The toxicity keeps people subjugated.
- There needs to be a radical restructuring of the priesthood.
- The Mass = magic words. People are compelled to sprinkle water on the forehead of babies or they will go to Hell when they die.
- He referred to priestly vestments as "dresses."

"State of the Survivor Movement: Amazing Successes and Challenges Ahead" was the subject of Barbara Blaine's talk; she also provided an update on SNAP. Blaine, who is the founder and president of SNAP, is known for justifying a raid by Belgian police on churches looking for damaging evidence. She has also said that while aggrieved priests who countersue have "a LEGAL right to sue others, [they] don't have a MORAL

right to do so.” [Her emphasis.] So much for equal rights. Her “state of the survivor movement” presentation was simply a photo montage of various events, demonstrations and press conferences held by SNAP.

What was most noteworthy about Blaine’s session was the role played by Anderson. Now it is well known that Church-suing attorneys have been generously greasing SNAP for years. But if this incestuous relationship needed further proof, it was provided in spades by Anderson. As part of an emotional financial appeal to the attendees, he stated that “this is a titanic worldwide struggle to protect children. We are ‘the chosen ones’ to expose the abuse and we need to organize, share, and mobilize.” Then came the shakedown.

Anderson shamelessly conducted a fundraising appeal on the spot, matching dollar for dollar any donation made by an attendee. But even the multimillionaire has limits: he made it clear that he wouldn’t match a \$10,000 donation made by fellow attorney, Jeffrey Herman. One woman encouraged the gathering to “put SNAP in your will,” and an appeal was also made to become “a sustaining member of SNAP for \$25 per month”; everyone was encouraged to sign up with a credit card right then and there.

[Note: A few weeks after the conference ended, attendees were provided with a summary of its highlights. The fundraising appeal was described as an “amazing event,” so much so that it was touted as “an emotionally charged moment.” The final tally: “The people in the room set a record for fundraising at the conference by contributing over \$30,000.”

Let’s do the math. If Herman gave \$10,000, and Anderson pledged to match all donations save for Herman’s contribution, that means the attendees dished out \$10,000. In other words, two steeple-chasing attorneys accounted for two-thirds of all the money raised. Absent their input, SNAP folds. Not exactly the face of a grass roots movement.]

Author Jason Berry discussed “Human Rights Movements in the Church.” He also spoke about his new book, *Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church*, and his documentary, “Vows of Silence.” According to Berry, the “face of corruption in the Catholic Church is Cardinal Angelo Sodano.” It was Sodano’s handling of the Father Marcial Maciel Degollado case that prompted the accusation. Berry also charged that the Church uses “property and money to blunt the force of justice.”

As it turns out, Berry is the one who has little interest in justice. Here’s a personal example. In *Render Unto Rome* he says that Father Maciel “cultivated powerful conservatives.” He lists me as one of them. But I never met, corresponded with, or in any way had anything to do with the disgraced priest. Nor did I ever defend him. Berry knows all of this because I’ve corrected him before, putting forth the evidence. Yet he persists in lying.

In 1997, in a letter to the editor of the *Hartford Courant*, I took issue with a news story that reported, “Several [of the accusers] said Maciel told them he had permission from Pope Pius XII to seek them out sexually for relief of physical pain.” To which I replied, “To think any priest would tell some other priest that the pope gave him the thumbs up to have sex with another priest—all for the purpose of relieving the poor fellow of some malady—is the kind of balderdash that wouldn’t convince the most unscrupulous editor at any of the weekly tabloids. It is a wonder why *The Courant* found merit enough to print it.” I will leave it to the reader to decide whether this is proof that Maciel “cultivated” a relationship with me.

“The Unmasking of the Dallas Charter and Other Recent Game-Changers” was the subject of a discussion by Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of BishopAccountability.org, and Terence McKiernan, founder and president of the group. Many pundits and media outlets see BishopAccountability as nothing more

than an organization that tallies accusations against priests. In actual fact, its agenda, which was made positively clear at the conference, has more to do with stabbing the Catholic Church.

Doyle is a founder, or co-founder, of several Catholic dissident groups, including Voice of the Faithful. She told the audience that “the conspiracy begins at the Vatican” and the “zero tolerance policy is a sham.” That’s right—she believes that Rome is at the heart of a world-wide *conspiracy* to protect molesting priests (it is precisely this kind of mindset that is shared by Anderson; otherwise, he wouldn’t constantly be suing the Vatican). She made it plain that she wants the names of all priests accused between 1930-1960 to be released, notwithstanding the fact that many are long dead and cannot defend themselves. She also stated that the “review boards have become a new pressure point,” and that “the Gavin Group [which gathers diocesan data for the bishops] is getting worried” that their audits may be found to be flawed or false.

McKiernan informed the audience that the “Causes and Context” report by John Jay College was a “dangerous document.” The report, he charged, makes the “pernicious claim that most priests had a single victim.” Does he have evidence to the contrary? He presented none. According to Penn State professor Philip Jenkins, an expert on this subject, the original 2004 John Jay report found that “of the 4,392 accused priests, almost 56 percent faced only one misconduct allegation, and at least some of these would certainly vanish under detailed scrutiny.” Moreover, Jenkins wrote that “Out of 100,000 priests active in the U.S. in this half-century, a cadre of just 149 individuals—one priest out of every 750—accounted for over a quarter of all allegations of clergy abuse.” That’s not the kind of statistic that the alleged archival group, BishopAccountability, will ever report.

McKiernan showed what he is made of when he boasted, “I hope

we can find ways of sticking it to this man.” The man he wants to “stick it to” is none other than the head of the New York Archdiocese, and the president of the USCCB, Archbishop Timothy Dolan. This is not the voice of someone engaged in a fact-finding mission.

McKiernan went on a rant against the New York Archbishop. Dolan was accused of being a “doctrinal enforcer” who “only cares about climbing the ladder.” [That Dolan is already at the top of the ladder seems not to be understood by McKiernan.] Without a shred of evidence, he said that Dolan is “keeping the lid on 55 names” of predator priests in his archdiocese. It must be a pretty tight lid: not a single person in the entire country has ever made such a scurrilous accusation. It’s time to either put up or shut up.

David Clohessy, the executive director of SNAP, was joined by one of his colleagues, Joelle Casteix, to present a breakout session, “Working With Media to Reach Survivors and Expose Wrongdoers.” There was much in the way of advice, some of which was pedestrian. But there were some eye-popping moments.

Clohessy took the time to share some of the ways he manipulates the media. For example, attendees were instructed that to get media attention, it is best to hold press conferences outside a chancery or a police station. If it’s held outside the chancery, it makes it easy for the media because they only have to go to one location. After you are interviewed as a SNAP representative (they evidently have lots of deputies), he said, reporters will go inside to interview the diocesan PR person.

Talk, however, is not sufficient. Here are more of their schemes:

- “Display holy childhood photos!” Attorneys should conduct an interview in front of the parish where the priest was assigned (on public property). Why? Because

then you will get clients and you'll also have whistleblowers call you after they see the interview on TV.

- Use "feeling words" in interviews: "I was scared. I was suicidal." Be sad and not mad. The goal is to make an emotional connection with the audience. *If you don't have compelling holy childhood photos, we can provide you with photos of other kids that can be held up for the cameras.*
- Use the word "kids" as often as possible when being interviewed.
- It is not certain whether the media, which generally give a sympathetic hearing to SNAP, care how orchestrated these events are. But Catholics should care. After all, what is at stake is an attempt to manipulate public opinion, rallying Americans against the Catholic Church. Staging sadness is not only phony, it is unethical.

SNAP's mission statement says its goal is to "support one another in personal healing," and to pursue "justice and institutional change by holding individual perpetrators responsible and the church accountable." But its alleged interest in "personal healing" and "justice" was not on the minds of the presenters at the conference. What was clearly evident was their expressed interest in sundering the Catholic Church.

Those who have been truly victimized by priests, or anyone else, deserve our sympathy and charity. Those who posture as a victims' support organization, as well as those who work in tandem with them, do not. SNAP and its allies have long pulled the wool over the eyes of many in the media—it's time we all looked under the mask.