

THE DEEDS OF DALLAS

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When the cardinals left Rome in April, they came away with a statement that most branded inadequate. The same judgment befell the draft document of the bishops prior to the Dallas meeting. After Dallas, there is still much discontent, but a closer look at the survey data reveal a Church on the mend.

In Dallas, the bishops voted 239-13 in favor of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." Now contrast this finding—95 percent of the bishops approved the document—with the survey results of the *Washington Post*: it disclosed that only 44 percent of Catholics approved the final charter. Yet a *USA Today/CNN* poll found a 56 percent approval rating; it also reported that 63 percent said the bishops' policy would be effective for dealing with the problem. To top things off, a Zogby survey found that 79 percent of Catholics endorsed the policy. What's going on?

There's nothing wrong with the polling methodology. What the data reveal is an angry and confused laity. Indeed, in the *Washington Post* survey, anger was the most reported emotional response of Catholics towards the scandal. It is also true that this poll, which reported the lowest approval rating, was taken immediately after the Dallas meeting (the others came a little later). Moreover, this poll sought to tap how Catholics felt about the way the Church has responded all along to the problem. In short, tempers were still hot when this survey was taken and probing questions on how the Church has responded to the crisis may have colored answers regarding a fair assessment of the final document.

How big is the problem? Philip Jenkins, a Protestant professor at Penn State who has written a book on the subject, estimates that between 1 and 2 percent of priests have engaged in child

sexual molestation. The figure for the married Protestant clergy, he says, is between 2 and 3 percent. The *Washington Post* did its own survey of the dioceses. It found that over four decades, fewer than 1.5 percent of the estimated 60,000 or more men who have served in the priesthood were guilty of this crime.

To keep this in perspective, consider that a recent study by an Evangelical publication (*World* magazine) revealed that 30 to 35 percent of ministers of all denominations admit to having sexual relationships (defined as inappropriate touching to sexual intercourse) outside of marriage. Most of the sexual relations took place in pastoral counseling.

In agreement is Rev. Marie M. Fortune, head of the Center for the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence. She led a study of clergy sexual abuse and concluded that Catholic priests were no more prone to sexual misconduct than ministers. "It's an issue for the Catholics," she said, "but it's an issue for all of us."

Then there is the issue of reporting. We know the bishops failed to report cases of child sexual abuse to the authorities, but what about the clergy in other religions? Bill O'Reilly recently put this question to Westchester, New York, district attorney Jeanine Pirro. Here's the exchange:

Pirro: "Well, I've been a prosecutor for 26 years, and I've never received a report from the church, any church, any clergy, regarding suspected child abuse."

O'Reilly: "Not just the Catholic Church."

Pirro: "Not just the Catholic Church."

O'Reilly: "The Protestants, Jews, everybody."

Pirro: "Anybody, anybody."

What about those who work in the public schools? Professor Charol Shakeshaft of Hofstra University estimates that 15 percent of the country's 50 million schoolchildren will be

sexually abused by a teacher or other school employee. And how do school superintendents deal with these issues? In only 1 percent of the cases did the superintendents follow through to ensure that molesting teachers did not continue teaching elsewhere. They simply allow the teachers to move from school district to school district. They call it “passing the trash.”

None of this is said to justify anything that a Catholic priest may have done to harm a youngster. We expect more from priests. But it’s also true that over the past several months, many Americans—including Catholics—think that somehow the problem of sexual misconduct (especially of minors) is unique to priests. No. We have no monopoly on any sin.

The Catholic Church did not invent this problem. Indeed, unlike so many other institutions in our society, and unlike what is accepted by the dominant culture, the Church has the answer. It’s called restraint.

If every priest had accepted the Church’s teachings on human sexuality, we would have been spared the scandal. Sadly, they did not. But let’s not forget that most priests have been loyal sons of the Church. It’s especially important we not lose sight of this verity in times like this. The priests need our support now more than ever. So let’s stand with them and not against them.