

SELECTED SESSIONS

FIVE YEARS LATER: CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSES TO THE LEGACY OF THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS

- Topic: Five Years Later: Constructive responses to the legacy of the sexual abuse crisis in the American Catholic church since the bishops' 2002 meeting in Dallas.
- Convener: Lynn Bridgers, St. Thomas University
- Presenter: Donald Cozzens, John Carroll University
- Respondent: Lynn Bridgers, St. Thomas University
- Moderator: Greg Zuschlag, St. Thomas University

This paper, response and open discussion addressed constructive changes in the aftermath of the sexual abuse crisis in the United States Catholic church. June 2007 marks five years since the bishops of the United States met to establish a review board on sexual abuse of minors by clergy. As visitations to seminaries begin, the impact of the sexual abuse scandal continues to be felt. In this session a priest and a laywoman offered views on the Catholic sexual abuse crisis. This session focused on constructive responses, allowing the church to move forward, building community and fostering healing in the aftermath of this crisis. The session was well attended, with approximately fifty people, and was moderated by Greg Zuschlag, who began by introducing Donald Cozzens to those assembled.

In his forty-minute address, Fr. Cozzens began by describing a "typical" situation room meeting where key diocesan officials assembled after being informed of an allegation of sexual abuse in the year 1997, five years before the bishops' June 2002 meeting in Dallas. The focus was on the wellbeing of the institutional church, minimizing legal vulnerability and damage to the church's authority. This mindset, according to Cozzens, compounded the scandal and crisis and helped to create a "perfect ecclesial storm." Church officials often saw the church as "perfect," rather than in need of constant critique and reform. This encouraged what Cozzens termed an "episcopal consciousness," paralleling Walter Brueggemann's "royal consciousness," which blocked the ability to connect with human struggle shifting responsibility for abuse to the media, victim's attorneys, and psychologists.

A second factor, Cozzens argued, was the church's feudal structure, a structure based on unquestioned loyalty and the need for security and protection. In such a feudal system, loyalty and accountability was always upward and dialogue with those in the lower levels was unthinkable. Drawing on the work of Louis Bouyer, Cozzens argued that officials who practice *dominion* rather than *ministerium* misuse church authority. Cozzens cited the establishment of the National Review Board

and the Office for the Protection of Children and Young People, the studies commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and other provisions as constructive steps. However, the church needs to improve its efforts at listening. Its decision to adopt a “zero tolerance” policy, Cozzens felt, was a mistake, isolating clergy members and failing to provide timely resolution of abuse charges.

Five years after Dallas, Cozzens returned to his theoretical situation room. Now he believes, the diocesan representatives are more likely to focus on pastoral care of the victim, notification of proper authorities, appropriate response to the accused priest, and the canonical rights of the accused. Cozzens closed by reminding those present that the corporate culture of the church must not trump the pastoral mission of the church.

After being introduced by Zuschlag, Bridgers began her response by claiming the central issue was the capacity to absorb suffering and learn from it. She recalled offering her years of training in trauma and spirituality to the bishops and the Office of Youth and Child Protection when the Boston sexual abuse crisis was at its worst. Her offer was not needed, a staff member responded, because her work centered on healing and the Office was only interested in prevention and litigation. Bridgers highlighted some amounts paid out by the church through litigation and the numerous forms of progress made in terms of prevention.

But healing is needed and based on work in traumatic studies, Bridgers argued those confronting traumatic events must always make a moral decision whether to remain in relationship with the survivor. Traumatic events join victim and witness in a common alliance to counter the silence and denial required by the abuser. The bishops had largely failed in this, and in the process ceded moral authority to those who did forge such alliances.

A better response, Bridgers suggested, would be for the bishops to recognize the dual streams of authority in church history instead of solely focusing on the dogmatic, episcopal and hierarchical. The other—the mystical, prophetic and liberatory stream—emerges from injustice or suffering. The most dynamic episcopal leadership comes when bishops fuse both streams. Bridgers cited Joseph Cardinal Bernadin’s forgiveness of the man who falsely accused him of abuse, Archbishop Oscar Romero’s voice against the murder of the Salvadoran people, and Thomas Gumbleton’s ability to overcome abuse and found Pax Christi as examples. By forging an alliance with survivors of trauma and abuse, she suggested, the traumatized church can recover its own mantle of authority.

A spirited discussion followed, with participation by diverse members of the audience, including questions about formation and support for clergy, alternative ecclesial responses to trauma, and the ongoing need for dialogue that runs counter to solely upward flow of the feudal structure.

LYNN BRIDGERS
Saint Thomas University
Miami Gardens, Florida