

February 15, 2006  
Delegate  
House of Delegates  
Annapolis, Maryland

Dear Delegate,

We are Catholics and friends of several people who, when very young, were sexually abused by a priest or another employee of the Catholic Church. You may know several victims, too, given the statistics on the sexual abuse of children in America generally. And the problem is not confined to the Catholic Church.

It is my opinion that Maryland laws give childhood victims of sexual abuse in the past very limited access to our courts. Our laws do little better for children victimized today or tomorrow. We have learned that given our current laws, Maryland can be described as a "pedophile-friendly" state.

We need your help to pass two house bills just introduced by Maryland delegate Pauline Menes and co-sponsored by eleven other delegates.

What is the problem with current Maryland law?

Under current Maryland civil law, a victim of sexual abuse must file suit against his/her abuser within seven years of the date reaching their age of majority, effectively by no later than age 25.

We now know that it takes the average victim much longer to come forward because of the psychological trauma of sexual abuse and because of the stigma attached.

**It is now a well-established fact that most abused children do not begin to deal openly with the personal psychological damage from their experiences until they are in their late thirties or early forties. They need access then to our court system.** [Testimony by Father Thomas Doyle to Ohio legislators, December 2006. Online copy on request.]

Victims are dealing with memories of sexual abuse by an adult to whom they once gave a child's complete, loving trust. Victims often live in fear and shadow, alone, for a long time, because they feel shame and because their abusers have Church protection. The Church has great power to intimidate or discredit any accuser.

These victims need access to our impartial court system. Under current Maryland law, their right to a day in court will lapse long before they can be ready.

*What is being proposed?*

The proposed bills (HB 1147 & HB1148) would do two things:

- allow victims of sexual abuse in the past a two year "window" in which to bring legal action.
- Second, for future victims, it would mean that they can legal action up the age of 45.

Maryland's bills will:

- Give confused, frightened, and traumatized victims more time to understand and recover from their deep wounds before considering legal action
- Ensure that future victims will be able to have their day in court when they are ready
- Expose child molesters
- Hold accountable those who have protected child molesters in the past and who do so in the future
- Further educate the public about how wide-spread this problem is in our society

Statistical studies now show that:

- A single child molester will likely abuse over 80-100 victims in a lifetime. (Parynik Mendel, *The Male Survivor: The Impact of Sexual Abuse*)
- 1 out of 3 girls and 1 out of 5 boys will be sexually molested by the age of 18. ([www.goodtouchbadtouch.com](http://www.goodtouchbadtouch.com))
- 90% of child molesters are known to the child
- Less than 3% of all perpetrators are caught. (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect)

We are saddened that our Catholic bishops are still not policing the Church effectively and still not treating victims compassionately. The abuse continues. America's bishops still do not have an adequate, unified, consistent approach to the crisis. (*New York Times* editorial of 18 January 2006) In the last few weeks, three American bishops have publicly said more needs to be done. Rev. Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, Cardinal George of Chicago, and Bishop Skylstad of Spokane. (See news summaries on Clergy Abuse Tracker at <http://www.ncrnews.org/abuse>.)

At the moment, many Catholic bishops are actively opposing legislation that would expose predators and help victims heal. They say they want to protect the "patrimony" of the Church. Mark Chopko, general counsel to the U.S. Bishops Conference, so defended the bishops just recently (*National Catholic Reporter*, 20 January 2006, p.10). Which sexually-abused child or grandchild, niece or nephew would you sacrifice to protect the accumulated riches of the Church?

Our children have been, and still are being denied their most basic human and civil rights. The bishops want, in effect, the right to choose how much they will do or not do for the victims of clergy abuse. Our children, our youngest citizens, must be better protected by our civil laws. Victims of past sexual abuse need access to our courts. Then our impartial courts and juries can decide.

Victim after victim have testified that his or her heartfelt intent is to bring the bishops to some accountability for protecting abusers. They know that in this way they can improve conditions for our children. Taking action in this way helps the victim heal. We know of no victim who takes pleasure in taking legal action or in the monetary award. Legal action is a means to protect children and, ultimately, to heal the Church.

Ten years ago, we would not have believed that we would have to come to you asking your support for such a bill. But ten years ago, we did not know. Nor did you. Now you do. Please, vote to change Maryland's law. Support House Bills 1147 and 1148.

Yours truly,