Healing and Credibility

In this issue, America deals with a crisis that is causing enormous pain and great scandal in the church—sexual abuse by priests. These crimes—there is no other word for them—have physically, psychologically and spiritually damaged hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children and their families. They have torn apart parish communities and smeared the reputation of anyone wearing a Roman collar. The attempts by some bishops to cover up the crimes have shocked those in and outside the church more than any other event in memory. The fact that abusive priests were reassigned to other parishes, where they again violated children, is deplorable and inexcusable.

While many bishops did not understand the gravity of the issue before the mid-1980s, the national attention and the jury award in the Lafayette, La., case in 1986 should have awakened the church. Some bishops took action. In 1993 Bishop Donald Wuerl of Pittsburgh fought for the removal from ministry of a priest all the way through the church’s highest tribunal in Rome. And when it overruled him, he demanded another hearing, which ultimately upheld the bishop. In the late 1980s, the U.S. bishops’ conference held closed-door discussions on the issue, during which individual bishops acknowledged mistakes they had made and warned their colleagues not to do the same. But even when insurance companies excluded coverage for liability for sexual abuse, some bishops still did not get the message. They continued to believe that the problem was being blown out of proportion by the media and complained about the coverage given the issue by The National Catholic Reporter.

Only in 1993 did the conference leadership go public with guidelines and discussion. But the conference has repeatedly said that it has no authority to impose rules in this area and that it must respect the autonomy of each local bishop. This is unconvincing to many, considering that the conference has passed national legislation micromanaging such things as when people can kneel and stand during the eucharistic prayer.

What can be done to protect children and restore the credibility of the church? It is probably too late for episcopal resignations to make much difference. If early on some bishops had been willing to claim full responsibility and resign, victims, parishes, the media and juries might have been less inclined to vent their anger on the church as a whole. That not one bishop (except the two who were themselves abusers) has resigned during this 15-year-long crisis is astonishing.

What can the bishops do now? The sacrament of confession, penance and reconciliation points the way. Bishop after bishop has now apologized, but it would be appropriate for the bishops at their next national meeting to have a penance service. In this way they could publicly and sacramentally express their sorrow and need for forgiveness. Victims of abuse should be invited to participate in this service to the extent they find healing. Similar services could be held in dioceses around the country.

Second, the bishops must be willing to listen humbly to their people’s complaints and opinions, as Cardinal Bernard Law recently did at a public meeting in Boston. A climate of secrecy and reluctance to challenge those in authority helped cover up the abuse. It is also time to stop saying that certain topics are off limits for discussion in the church. The Boston Pilot’s editorial of March 15, which raised questions about celibacy and the ordination of married men, is certainly an exemplary beginning. Honest research and discussion about the extent of homosexuality in the clergy also must occur.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” does not work in the U.S. military; it is even more corrupting in seminaries and in the church. The ignorance displayed by the Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls in questioning the validity of the ordination of gay men should not be passed over in silence, nor should the false equating of homosexuality and pedophilia.

Third, there is need for a new system for investigating allegations of sexual abuse. Guidelines are in place; they must be strictly enforced. No professional group—lawyers, police, accountants, doctors—is good at policing itself. For the clergy, this is even more difficult not only because they are investigating their brothers, but also because their whole training urges them toward forgiveness rather than punishment. The bishops—even those who have done the right thing—now have no credibility in policing the clergy. No one will trust a clean bill of health given by a clerical board. Needed instead is an independent lay board in each diocese empowered to investigate every allegation against a priest or church employee. If the bishop does not follow its advice, it should be free to publicize its findings. Only such a board could credibly clear priests falsely accused of a crime.

The crisis of sexual abuse should never have happened. But as with every sin and failure, there is an opportunity for examining our conscience, confessing our failures, doing penance and firmly resolving that the church not be part of the problem but part of the solution to the wider plague of sexual abuse in our country. Such a program can take us out of darkness into the light of Easter.