

## The Church in the Media

By The VIRTUS Programs

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These days, it sometimes seems as though any good news regarding the Catholic Church is overshadowed by headline stories that remind us of the painful past of child sexual abuse in our Church, and the way that leadership of the Church has at times ignored the issues facing them. The failure of someone in any leadership to act appropriately adds more harm to an already terrible situation where abuse has been historically present, and can re-victimize survivors who have already suffered so much. Whenever a new report of sexual abuse within the Church comes to light, whether current or past abuse, the Church's painful history with this issue is in the headlines again.

For those who strive to live the teachings of Jesus and work together for the protection of children, youth and the vulnerable, these stories about the harm caused by the people we love(d) and trust(ed) can seem overwhelming. Over the past twenty plus years, we have been confronted with the reality of these stories time and time again—in the media, and, from people we know. Our families, for example, might only focus on the failures of the Church—not on the accountability reforms or the measures that have been put in place to maintain safe environments for children. Our neighbors bring it up in conversation. Co-workers ask us about the issue. There is negative material all over social media. Op-ed pieces get written about the Church and letters to editors blame the issue of child sexual abuse on priests and Catholic Church leadership.

As stories continue to be released in news headlines, we might be asking ourselves *when it will stop?* When will we be able to say confidently that these problems are fully of the past, and that what we know about now is fully out in the open and being dealt with, correctly and transparently? All of this disclosure is powerful; it can be helpful to encourage other survivors to come forward and begin their healing journey, it can shed light on any holes in our behaviors or practices that need to be corrected, and it can give us the opportunity in conversations to share what has been done within the Church for accountability and child protection. Bringing the information to light, in a healthy way, is good, because it is honest and forthcoming about what was done and not done—what was condoned or overlooked or ignored. It is good for leadership to know how to lead more effectively, more pastorally, and more diligently—and to be held accountable for putting any personal feelings about any person ahead of the well-being of children and the vulnerable.

We can only truly be the Church Jesus founded when we are willing to share our pain and our triumphs, our shortcomings and our gifts, our regrets, and our joys. Remember, it is a good thing that these things are no longer hidden from view. Offenders can no longer hide their behavior behind a veil of secrecy or a charismatic personality. We, the Body of Christ, are calling out all that is sinful and hurtful and bringing light to the darkness.



Take heart! Consider that all issues come to light in this time because God saw that this faith community could be trusted to deal with the issue, bring it into the light, and hold accountable those who allowed abuse or other harm to occur. God trusts us, the Catholic faithful; to take care of those who were harmed by people they should have been able to trust. We can continue to be examples of how to create an environment that assures the safety of all, and we can listen to those who have victimized and help to bolster them in hope.

Whenever we are faced with another situation where someone did not act as a protector of children, we can take a moment to recommit ourselves to the importance of maintaining safe environments. Step five in the *Protecting God's Children Program*<sup>®</sup> involves communicating our concerns. If we ever become aware of a situation of abuse or the failure to report abuse, we must take action. Even if someone else says they will take action, we must remain vigilant. If no action is taken—we must keep reporting up the chain of command until our concerns are addressed. For instance, if you observe a concerning behavior (not actual abuse, or what causes you to suspect abuse; rather, inappropriate behavior that is unsafe, unhealthy or against the rules) by a parish employee and you tell a supervisor—yet the behavior continues—keep reporting! Report the instance to another supervisor, or the pastor of the parish. Then, if it is still ignored or you feel that resolution has not occurred, report it to the diocese.

As we continue to work toward preventing child sexual abuse from happening and stopping it from continuing, we are doing God's work on earth. We are creating an environment that promotes the furtherance of our faith, the expansion of the Kingdom of God, and the formation of people who serve children and youth with love, grace, dignity and respect.

As a caring adult, you make this happen! You are a protector of children, youth and the vulnerable and can help foster accountability and healing. YOU are making a difference that makes the difference!