

Abuse scandal puts victims' group back in the spotlight: Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests

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The drumbeat of news about clergy sexual abuse began in Ireland last year. This year, the stories spread—to Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Norway. The drumbeat got louder.

E-mails across the ocean continued to pour into the Chicago and St. Louis offices of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). By March, SNAP decided to respond.

Despite sharply declining revenue, the U.S.-based nonprofit group dug into its depleted coffers and found \$6,000 for founder and president Barbara Blaine and outreach director Barbara Dorris to spend ten days in Europe opening new SNAP chapters in Germany, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium and England.

The pair slept on couches, rushed between buses and trains and grabbed snacks on the road. In Germany, they met with the justice minister and members of parliament about changing laws.

In its 22 years, SNAP has seen tremendous success in its mission to protect children. Many credit the group with bringing change to the Catholic Church since the clergy abuse crisis erupted in Boston in 2002. SNAP has also been criticized—for the way it raises money, its aggressive pursuit of headlines, and the ways it publicly identifies priests accused of abuse by anonymous plaintiffs.

For the group's leaders, the crisis in Europe feels familiar—in a sickening way. And in recent weeks, e-mails from Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador have begun to arrive.

“People all over the world are struggling to get their minds around this,” Dorris said. “They want to know how anyone would have known about a child molester—a church leader—and failed to take action. It feels a lot like the early days here.”

The early days started in 1985, when Blaine reported her own abuse to the church. Three years later, recognizing that victims of clergy sexual abuse and their families needed their own kind of support, she started SNAP.

The abuse scandal that erupted in the U.S. eight years ago thrust SNAP into the headlines. The organization helped form relationships between victims, attorneys and the press, helping to animate a scandal that would eventually force the U.S. church to adopt reforms.

David Clohessy, SNAP's national director, said the group's founding mission remains the same—"to expose predators and to protect children." In pursuit of those goals, SNAP's leaders have been relentless critics of what it considers the Catholic Church's policies of secrecy and self-preservation at any cost.

Since 2002, SNAP has maintained pressure on the church by alerting reporters to victims' lawsuits, some of which document how bishops moved problem priests from one diocese to another. The group has also fought statute-of-limitations laws that have been used to limit the size of financial settlements.

Some U.S. church officials acknowledge that SNAP has made a difference. Bishop Blase Cupich, head of the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota, and chair of the U.S. Bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People, said SNAP "has done some very important things."

Despite its success, several factors— church reforms, a finite number of lawsuits, waning public interest in a difficult and graphic story—contributed to a slowdown in donations to the nonprofit group.

Contributions to SNAP grew nearly sixfold between 2002 and 2006, when its revenue was more than \$900,000, according to IRS records. But the following year, SNAP brought in half that amount. In 2009, revenue fell again—to \$420,000, with expenses totaling \$499,000.

In the past year, the 9,000-member organization moved into smaller offices in Chicago and cut its treasurer's workload from full-time to ten hours per week. Blaine works out of Chicago; Dorris and Clohessy live in St. Louis.

Under pressure from SNAP leaders and other Catholics, a former Vatican official who was recently revealed to have praised a French bishop for not reporting an abusive

priest to the police withdrew as chief celebrant of a traditional Latin mass April 24 at the large Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

The sponsoring Paulus Institute said three days before the event that retired cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos of Colombia would be replaced to “help maintain the solemnity, reverence and beauty” of the liturgy. A French Catholic magazine published a 2001 letter in which the cardinal praised a bishop for not telling police of a priest who had sexually abused children and was later sentenced to 18 years in prison.

SNAP’s critics often claim that its methods—leafleting the neighborhood around an accused priest’s church or calling news conferences to herald the name of a newly accused priest—are irresponsible. Such tactics, they argue, permanently damage the reputation of a priest who is falsely or mistakenly accused by an alleged victim who can remain anonymous behind the shield of a “John Doe” lawsuit.

But Clohessy says SNAP does not name a priest unless a civil lawsuit has been filed or the priest is criminally charged or named in the press. He’s also unapologetic: “You’ve got to err on the side of protecting the physical and emotional safety of children rather than the reputation of one adult.”

Many church leaders and other critics also question where SNAP’s money comes from. Although nonprofit groups do not pay taxes, they must file annual IRS reports detailing the sources of their donations. Those details are not public, though some nonprofit groups make that information public in other ways, such as through annual reports. SNAP doesn’t, leading to charges of hypocrisy.

“For an organization that demands transparency from the institutional church, why can’t SNAP be open and specific about its sources of funding and its expenses?” said Ned McGrath, a spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Detroit.

The theory voiced by McGrath and other church officials is that victims come to SNAP for support and are directed to law firms that handle abuse claims. Those firms have obtained more than \$2 billion in settlements and judgments from the Catholic Church in the United States. A portion of that money, some church leaders suggest, is given back to SNAP in contributions.

SNAP president Blaine said the organization protects its contributors list to protect the privacy of victims and declined to provide a list of attorneys or law firms that

have contributed to SNAP. “I don’t see us making some major change in exposing our donors,” she said. -*Tim Townsend, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, via Religion News Service*