Forgiveness shines

through many faces

AW Richard Sipe, a therapist and an expert on clerical sexual abuse, gave this address in conjunction with an apology service to victims of abuse, on 7 November 2004 at the University of St Thomas in St Paul MN.

The focus of our considerations is forgiveness and healing, specifically forgiveness of sexual abuse by bishops and priests. I invite you to struggle with me around 10 rules or norms for forgiving the Church and clergy, steps that lead to healing.

1 Forgive life. Life is not fair or just. Physical, intellectual, emotional, environmental, and even spiritual gifts and limitations are bestowed with a mysterious haphazardness. Life endows more benefits on some for no special reason. Fate dispossesses others of advantages with an equal caprice.

Some of us grow up in homes, neighborhoods, and circumstances that are nourishing and supportive. Others have endured unspeakable hardship and neglect growing up. Some of us enjoy good health; others are afflicted with pain, suffering and loss. Life gives each of us some good things and deprives us of others.

We can't control these endowments or events. No one can change his or her inheritance from life. We simply have to give up resistance to reality. Forgive life! If we can forgive life we will probably find more things to be thankful for than any of us realized. To put this in religious terms it means to accept the will of God.

2 Forgive yourself. Who of us has 2 not made misjudgments and taken missteps? I like Flannery O'Connor's reflection "Human nature is so faulty that it can resist any amount of grace and most of the time it does" Even the most blessed among us, if honest, will have had thoughts, words, and actions to regret, that we have made lamentable and reprehensible choices.

If we can bring ourselves to forgive ourselves, and if we should repent and forgive ourselves for any guilt that is rightfully ours, then we will come to understand what it is to forgive another. "Forgive as we have been forgiven." That is the gold standard, and it applies to us as forgivers in need of forgiveness.

It is important for us to be grounded in an honest sense of our own guilt and self-forgiveness because abuse, sexual violation and betrayal by the trusted, distorts the realities of our merited guilt and our justifiable self-recrimination.

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The guilt, the shame, the loss of dignity that rightfully belongs to the abuser for his behavior is thrust into the soul of the innocent victim. This venom poisons the soul of the victim, sometimes even to death. The cancer of this unmerited guilt has to be excised because it is foreign, false, and cannot be incorporated into a system of honest responsibility.

The self-distortion that results from the sexual abuse of one who advertises himself as holy and sexually safe is almost unbearable. The burden becomes incomprehensible when an institution that calls itself the Body of Christ heaps opprobrium and vilification on the victim and colludes to hide its part in the process of abuse rather than healing the virus at its source, which is itself.

Are we all burdened by the abuse of the clergy? Yes. Are we all confused by the evident part the church hierarchy has played in the drama of hypocrisy that we call the crisis of sexual abuse? Certainly!

Forgiveness of ourselves and of others is a process of separating out responsibilities and realities. Jesus never softened his condemnation of anyone who would "scandalize one of these little ones." Rather that a millstone be put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea. That millstone does not belong to the victim. That is the burden of the abuser and his supporters. He must work that out by himself with his God.

We have a Christian model. The center of the Christian mystery and Christian life is the act of redemptive forgiveness on the cross that is embodied in the celebration of the Eucharist. Inexhaustible and infinite forgiveness becomes available to anyone who is open to it. Sublime in mystery, simple in theory and unspeakably complex in human application.

The value of this forgiveness was the sacrifice of life: Love unto death. The price for this forgiveness was truth. Jesus was crucified for love because he told the truth.

We can only enter into redemptive forgiveness by struggling for radical truth within ourselves and in our Church. Each day at Mass we make a stab at radical truth: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. We have sacramental confession to explore the deeper truth about ourselves because in our daily struggles we sometimes fail.

Ritual forgiveness is perhaps easier to comprehend and utilize when we are reconciling our own faults than when we are faced with the morass of corruption in the ministry and the Church that holds the responsibility to administer reconciliation.

How can I understand? How can I compute the sexual violation, the rape, by a priest or a

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bishop who celebrates daily Mass and who absolves sinners in Confession? How can I endure the betrayal that was executed in the name of religion, under the guise of ministry?

I am not Christ. We are not Christ. But we are Christians. We have a right to expect our Church, our bishops and our priests, to bring us closer to Christ's example and aid us in our Christian striving. We are disappointed and disillusioned by the number of priests and bishops who violate their celibate commitment in vicious ways.

In spite of widespread betrayal, we need to struggle like Christ for truth and love. We need to enter into the process wherein we decipher what it means both to forgive and be forgiven.

But we must humbly realize that just as Christ's infinite forgiveness has not, and cannot reform those who refuse to respond, neither can the individual or collective power of our forgiveness reform our church.

But we can make a dent. We are making a difference. In Christ we can succeed. In the process we feel isolated because the familiar religious supports are no longer available or trustworthy. But we have each other to explore the practical ways back to reconciliation and reform. Christ's truth and love is our guide.

4We are not alone. It may not be of immediate consolation to victims of abuse to know the extent of the abuse problem in the American Church. But I hope a review of some facts will extend a bit of comfort.

Facts of the abuse should also challenge all Catholics who care about the Church. The scope of sexual abuse by the clergy goes far beyond any of us as individuals.

The John Jay study commissioned by the American Bishops said that between 3% and 6% of Catholic priests abuse minors. They also cautioned that the figures they reported could not accurately determine the exact dimensions of the problem because of underreporting.

The bishop of my diocese [San Diego] acknowledged that 66 priests were reported for abuse. He, using only his own judgement, dismissed 22 of the reports as "unreliable." The diocese, however, now has 150 civil law cases pending against it. Documents to be produced in court will give us a more factual account.

The Boston Archdiocese recorded that 7.6% of its priests abused minors. Because of further revelations, that percentage is now

approaching 10%. New Hampshire reported 8.2% of its priests were abusers. In 1986 in the diocese of Tucson, AZ, 24% of the priests were sexual abusers. In 1991 in the Los Angeles Archdiocese 56 of 710 priests were sexual abusers. That figure includes two bishops. LA is a jurisdiction where 244 priests have been presently acknowledged as abusers, and 75% of the parishes have had an abuser serving them. In the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese, 45% of the parishes have had sexual abusers on their staffs. Boston registers a similar proportion.

Through their violations bishops have relinquished all moral credibility in every matter of human sexuality.

Studies of the number of priest abusers belonging to religious orders have not been completed, but preliminary indications point to figures over 10%. All figures available do not include the abuse of vulnerable adults. Knowledgeable experts in the field of child abuse state that the number of victims who have come forward so far should be multiplied by a factor of ten.

Voice of the Faithful can play an important role in assembling accurate data. Precise data supports victims, the integrity of the priesthood, and the good of us all.

We must remember that bishops violate their celibacy in equal proportion as priests. Many are not in a position to make celibate regulation plausible. Some bishops have resisted co-operation and even defied legitimate civil authorities striving to determine the parameters of the problem of clergy abuse.

So far reports from grand juries have produced the most reliable picture of the dynamics of abuse and cover-up conspiracies in specific dioceses. That picture is dire indeed.

5 Do not forget. To forgive does not mean to forget. In fact, remembering is essential to the healing process. Covering an abscess, shielding it from light and air fosters festering and decay. The Church cannot heal if she forgets her past. Church leaders are creating a huge moral chancre by working to forget its part in the dynamic of abuse, and by pretending clerical abuse is "history."

Indeed clerical abuse truly has a long and inglorious history extending back as far as church records exist. Attempting to keep the history of clerical abuse secret has been a contributing factor to the current crisis.

Absolution for any person asking for forgiveness involves a process in which he must remember. First, he must acknowledge the full extent of his violations. Second, he must take complete and full responsibility for his actions or negligence and their consequences. Third, he must compensate adequately for the abuse and the harm done. Fourth, he must effectively and positively determine that he will not repeat the behavior for which he wants forgiveness.

The cost of being forgiven is truth—plain, simple, unvarnished truth based on fact. Nothing less than truth and reformation will do for the priests or bishops who have taken sexual advantage of a boy, girl, or vulnerable adult. Nothing less than reformation is required from bishops and priests who have countenanced abuse, covered up abuse, neglected to respond to reasonable indications of abuse, excused or protected abusing clergy. All of these men ignored the "scandal" suffered by the little ones. They are guilty.

Where have the 90% of priests been who have not abused minors sexually? Had they no suspicions? Had they heard no rumors? How many fellow priests and bishops disregarded complaints and reports? After all, even a "suspicion of abuse or neglect" noted by a physician or therapist is enough to trigger an investigation by civil authorities who must protect children.

I have reviewed thousands upon thousands of pages of depositions by priests, church officials, and bishops. I have seen other depositions on videotape. Mine has been a sad education in arrogance, evasion, and mendacity. Several Catholic lawyers have said to me, "I never could have imagined that bishops could lie like this." Several Catholic victims' lawyers have entered therapy to help them come to grips with the personal trauma they have suffered because of revelations about their church that they have been forced to face.

Many bishops stand up to say they are "sorry for the pain that victims have suffered." Well intended but hollow apologies will not heal. I have heard many ministerial excuses: "We didn't know! Psychiatrists misled us! We were only following lawyers' advice!" What bishop does not, and did not know that sex between a minor and a priest is a serious violation of celibacy? What bishop does not know that sex (by anyone) with a minor or

vulnerable adult is illegal? No one needs a psychiatrist or a lawyer to enlighten him about these basic facts.

The fact that such activity is sinful does not offer forgiveness as a convenient cover up. Forgiveness is not an excuse for secrecy and "forgetting" reality.

As far as I know, not one bishop has stood to ask forgiveness for his neglect, his blindness to the real harm done to victims, his collusion in covering for abusing priests, his preference for preserving image over the protection of his flock, his unwillingness to assure the celibate practice of his priests.

The Church in the United States has not yet produced an Archbishop Romero. We need to reestablish a modicum of moral leadership in the American Church.

Remembering is of the essence of being forgiven and healed. The price for being forgiven is reformation. There are no cut rate, half measures that can merit forgiveness or insure healing and health. Reform! or wither away!

The process of forgiving a transgression or violation is really an easier process than being forgiven. Forgiving means freeing oneself of the bonds of resentment, grudge, hate, and retaliation. It means standing up for the truth.

Freeing ourselves does not mean we roll over and die or become toadies of an abusive system or institution. No. To remember in freedom allows us to mobilize our energies to heal others and ourselves.

Cultivate your anger. Anger is more than an emotion. It is a normal consequence of being betrayed, of being molested, of being victimized, of being deceived, of being persecuted (like Christ) by religious authority. Anger provides energy necessary for survival. Anger is not an evil word. Although it has been vilified in the clerical dominated culture where docility and subservience are extolled above self-assertion and independence (and even reason). St. Augustine said: "Anger is the beginning of courage."

If Jesus Christ is the model for our forgiveness, He is also the model for our anger. Christ expressed his anger directly and forcefully. The two most prominent instances of Christ's anger are when he cast the moneychangers out of the temple and when he railed against hypocritical religious authorities.

He was severe in his criticism. "Whitened sepulchers! Appearing clean on the outside, but the inside is filled with rot and dead men's bones!" Plain talk. Justice untempered with gentleness. Justice based on fact, on truth. Who can deny that it takes courage to speak truth to power? Corrupt power is the focus of our anger. A formidable enemy!

The sexual abuse crisis continues to expose the unimagined hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in matters sexual and financial. There is no other way to say it. There is no gentle way to realize that the institutional Church, our Church, when measured by the yardstick of hypocrisy, is every bit as corrupt sexually and financially as it was at the time of the Protestant Reformation. That is fact. That is not hyperbole. *Shroud of secrecy* (Key Porter Books, Toronto, 1999) by a group of Vatican officials is one of several sources to substantiate this statement.

Without just anger none of us is capable of handling such a harsh and astounding reality that challenges us. We need the courage and tenacity that the cultivation of just anger generates.

De-emotionalize responses. The struggle against hypocrisy and abuse is a most serious business. We are not involved in some kind of moral pep rally. I learned long ago as a therapist that I could not help people even begin to solve their problems and heal themselves until they were willing to engage in a modicum of emotional neutrality. To see clearly and rationally one has to move beyond feeling.

After all, the misguided, unbridled, malignant, and malicious sexual emotions of abusing clergy are at the core of the problem of abuse. Abusers might try to disguise and justify their feelings as love. Not real! Whatever the host of emotions, intentions, or rationalizations that lead a priest or bishop to sexually abuse, the behavior remains destructive, irrational, and indefensible. There is no rational defense of abuse by one who portrays himself as "celibate" (sexually inviolate) for the Kingdom, and who poses as worthy of trust and obedience.

It is clear also, that the response of the official Church to the public revelations of abusing bishops and priests has been knee jerk emotion to protect image and money. The history of the current response to celibate violations remains for the most part reactionary. This has not always been so. There are well documented periods in church history when some bishops have taken a strong leadership role in combating celibate violations by the clergy.

But today, any rational moral action on the part of the hierarchy to the sexual abuse crisis has been forced by the rational analysis of the press, law enforcement, lawyers, and the victims, and lay people such as yourselves, who have focused on the facts.

It remains a huge puzzle: why should the hierarchy, or any of us, resist the facts? We need facts, not emotion, to solve the epic challenge before us. I trust Pope John Paul II's evaluation of the resources we have to bring to bear on problem solving:

It always has been the conviction of the church that God gave man the ability to arrive, with the light of his reason, at an understanding of the fundamental truths about his life and his destiny and, concretely, at the norms of correct action.

Now is not the time for recriminations, drama, weeping and gnashing of teeth, grand gestures, or emotional diatribes from any side. Now is the time for facts and reason to guide our thinking and decisions about sex and our faith.

8 Be not afraid. Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled nor let it be afraid. If you believe in God believe also in me." These are not merely words of consolation. They are a testimony about where our security really rests. Our security does not reside in popes, bishops or priests, no matter how holy. Our security is in Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Theologian Romano Guardini once said: "The Church is the cross on which Christ is crucified daily." It is. It is tempting for the hierarchy to attempt measures to mitigate the sting of clerical celibate failure by saying, "We are a church of sinners." When we take them at their word they become incensed, defensive, attacking and retaliatory. They say it, but they can't apply it themselves. That's when we become the Church.

We happen to have lived during an historical period with singularly holy popes. We have to remember that such has not always been the case. Parts of the history of the Roman Catholic Church reads like a cheap paperback novel. Some popes have been lechers, murderers, pedophiles, and others even less qualified to be called the Vicar of Christ.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is not dependent on the sanctity or the sins of our priests and bishops. But the moral qualities of bishops and priests do have profound effects. Pope Pius X said that more souls are lost because of miscreant priests than from any other source.

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It is understandable that some who have been sexually and administratively abused (raped) by officials of the Catholic Church no longer can tolerate any association with the institution. The loss of the religion of one's birthright is a severe deprivation.

To have one's faith ripped from one's soul by the betrayal of those trusted leaves scars on the soul that only Jesus, not religion, can transform into badges of moral honor. Jesus does not abandon. He is faithful. Not all priests and bishops are. Not all the successors of the apostles are credible.

We can only pray that a sufficient number of clergy of every stripe can rise to the moral and spiritual challenge facing the Church today. It will take clergy who are what they claim to be "celibate for the sake of the Kingdom."

PExamine obedience, sex, and charity. Theologian Yves Congar OP once said: "In the Catholic Church it has often seemed that the sin of the flesh was the only sin, and obedience the only virtue." Sex and obedience are intimately connected at the core of the Catholic Church.

Pope John Paul II has clearly declared that celibacy is essential to the priestly vocation. To begin with, celibacy is central to the social contract between priest and people. The priest promises to give up all human sexual involvement. The assurance of celibate practice by Catholic clergy is exchanged for the trust, respect, belief, support, obedience, and allegiance of the faithful. They in turn are to receive comfort, forgiveness, and salvation.

That social contract has been seriously violated by a number of bishops and priests, enough to bring the Church to an epochal confrontation. Through their violations bishops have relinquished all moral credibility in every matter of human sexuality. Sexual abuse of minors is merely the poster issue for the crisis. The crisis is about non-celibate (sexual) behavior of priests and bishops and their disregard for the rational judgments of married Christians in regard to human sexuality.

The hierarchy has concentrated a significant emphasis on the selection of candidates for the priesthood, as if a bad influence were invading seminaries and the priesthood and causing the sexual crisis. Much evidence shows that clerical candidates are subjected to sexual activity in seminaries, and that, from sexually active priests, and even spiritual directors.

Corruption of the priesthood is not coming from outside forces; it is specious to blame candidates or culture. Corruption of the priesthood is generated and perpetuated within the clerical system. Corruption does not seep up from the bottom. Corruption is raining down from the top.

Furthermore, the current crisis will not be solved easily. If celibacy is central to the priesthood as the pope declares, then the church must first acknowledge that it does not take training for celibacy seriously.

At one time a man had to memorize the whole of the New Testament to qualify for ordination to the episcopacy. Now, at least a three-year sequence in biblical studies is required for priestly ordination. If celibacy is so important to the priesthood why is any less study than a three-year/six-semester sequence required? Critics say there is nothing to teach or learn, or that seminaries are now doing an adequate job. Facts speak otherwise.

Finally, there are voices saying that the sexual crisis is of recent origin, caused by Vatican II and stimulated by the sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s. Even the Vatican once implied that it was simply an "American" problem. Nonsense!

Father Tom Doyle, Patrick Wall, and I have already prepared a preliminary outline of Church documents that record the long-standing, widespread prevalence of celibate violations, including clergy sex with minors. Written accounts and concerns go back to the year 309 and continue with remarkable frequency up to the present time. We are in the process of collecting the documents themselves into volumes available for everyone to read.

The sexual crisis of our time is not a new phenomenon. Sadly, past realities are being reincarnated in the American church today. Integrity and credibility are sorely lacking in the American Church leaders. As corruption of the priesthood becomes ever more evident, and the credibility of the hierarchy is ever more compromised the social contract with the laity becomes strained to the breaking point. It is not a problem of politics or public relations and cannot be cured by either.

The demise of obedience to church leadership is not the cause of the crisis in our church, it is a result of clerical malfeasance. Respect, trust, and obedience to the clergy can no longer be operative for the laity.

However with genuine charity, the vital essence of Christianity, on all sides, this crisis provides an opportunity to revivify pastoral care in the Church and a chance to rededicate the priesthood to celibate integrity, and the hierarchy to honesty and accountability. What else is a reformation all about? Charity should win out in the end.

10 Act as the Church you are. Church documents from 1517, shortly before Luther posted his 95 Theses, clearly show that a "functional diocese had no need for lay interference." An analysis of contemporaneous legislation defines the five functions of a secular priest in this order of importance.

- Primarily the priest was to preserve his image; his behavior should not provide cause for scandal about the priesthood or the church.
- The priest's most important function was to protect the income of the church.
- The priest was the protector of the "sacred," the church building, and its vessels and vestments.
- The priest had the cura animarum, or the duty to hear confession, distribute communion, administer the last sacraments, and to instruct his flock.
- "Finally, the priest functioned as an agent of the bishop, transmitting and receiving information concerning the desired diocesan order."

Is it not remarkable how operational this outline of clerical functions is in today's church? As effective as those priorities of functions may have been at one time, their breakdown and inadequacies are brutally apparent now. The church needs to reevaluate its pastoral priorities. The institutional church does need involvement from the laity. Not window dressing involvement. Operational involvement.

Time after time I have seen bishop after bishop resort to a function of image preserver, income supervisor, property protector, administrator above all and before any consideration of the care of souls. Bishops have become CEOs, not in addition to, but rather than, pastors.

Public relations have been a principal and primary response of the hierarchy to the abuse crisis. Slogans like "Restoring Trust" rather than substantial moral leadership have occupied bishops' efforts. The Cardinal of Los Angeles employs the firm of Michael Sitrick and Associates as his public relations firm. (This is the same firm employed by the tobacco companies and Enron.) At an estimated cost of \$50,000 a month, public relations have reportedly cost LA over a half million dollars already. The U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops reportedly has PR projects costing millions.

One courageous, completely honest bishop who would lift his head above the crowd would be worth more than all PR campaigns put together. Of course all Christians know what it would cost. Another crucifixion!

Any genuine progress in meeting the sex abuse crisis has been because of lay pressure. Isolation from solid, common-sense, lay involvement has resulted in continuing harm not just to the violated minors and faithful, but to the bishops themselves who continue to shoot themselves in the foot.

Two examples: Cases of sexual abuse in Dallas could have been settled with several victims of Fr. Rudy Kos in 1995 for a few hundred thousand dollars and some consolation from the bishop. Instead, church authorities chose the corporation route. A jury in 1997, appalled by hearing what the Diocese of Dallas knew and did, awarded the plaintiffs \$32.5 million in compensation. The bishop of Dallas is still there.

A young man violated by Msgr. Michael Harris cost the Los Angeles and Orange dioceses \$5.2 million. The victim had simply requested \$300,000 to pay for therapy and the chance to continue his education. The unwillingness of the Church to be open, accountable, and clean its own house, is costing it dearly, both financially and spiritually.

The latest church maneuver to protect its "assets" is to file for bankruptcy. This tactic demonstrates exactly where the bishops' treasures reside. They are not in people! Not in pastoral integrity! Not in truth and openness! Bishops' security and hope resides in property and power.

Many people will be unjustly harmed by this political end run. But as Francois Mauriac said: "The Church turns to politics when it fails to produce enough saints."

The Archdiocese of Portland and the Dioceses of Tucson and of Spokane have already filed for bankruptcy. Others will follow. I know a good deal about sexual abuse in those places. The violations of celibacy at top administration posts and the toleration of abuse on all levels of the clergy are horror tales yet to be reported.

Perhaps some good for the reformation of the church can be retrieved in the end from bankruptcy procedures. Already the Department of Justice from Washington DC is involved. The cold analytical eye of a bankruptcy judge may sort out the actual financial dealings of these churches and give an honest accounting that the faithful deserve.

However, some bishops claim that compensation to victims prevents a diocese from continuing its works of charity, when in truth the diocese pays only 8% of the monies for Catholic Charities. The rest comes from federal and civic sources.

We will find out how much money dioceses have spent on their lawyers. Don't these funds far exceed the expenses of plaintiffs lawyers and compensation to victims? What has the American Church spent on public relations? An external accounting will validate church priorities.

A gift of *Bread Rising* to a friend will keep the reform leaven rising in their consciousness for a long time.

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Editor and Publisher Terence Dosh, PhD 4124 Harriet, Mpls, MN 55409 • 612-827-1818 doshx001@umn.edu published eight times a year, subscription, \$19 The kind of obedience that has kept the laity quiet and subservient is over. We are witnessing the moral bankruptcy of our hierarchy. The laity must focus a cold and analytical eye on the dynamics of that demise.

Several grand jury reports have made it clear that the bishops cannot reform themselves or adequately manage sexual behavior in the ministry. They will never be able to achieve the integrity demanded by their office without the pressure, support, and supervision of the laity who are the Church. This is not a contest, but an invitation to cooperation.

Those who are the Church must demand accountability and transparency to which the Pope and some bishops have pledged themselves. Together we need to review all the documentation that records the path taken into this abyss. There is no other way to repair current pitfalls and forge a better path to the forgiveness and healing possible only in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION: We have come together to support victims of clergy abuse. We assemble to encourage clergy of integrity and we look for ways to stimulate structural integrity in our church. I hope that the "rules of forgiveness" can provide us with some direction toward those objectives in the midst of the fog of degradation we find our church in today.

In this confusion we can use some simple guidelines for our individual growth too. I offer this check list for our personal healing:

- Demand the truth from yourself and those you wish to relate to, especially religious figures.
- · Deal constructively with reality, no matter how harsh.
- · Be willing to change. Personal healing is not possible without it.
- Work toward freeing yourself from symptoms, tensions, and anxieties that are produced by violations and betrayal by religious powers.
- · Find satisfaction in forgiveness, giving and receiving it.
- Establish satisfying relationships of mutual satisfaction and helpfulness, free of the traumas and scars of the past.
- Direct your instinctive energy anger into creative and constructive action.
- Expand your capacity to love. Love is more powerful than any violation personal or institutional. Charity does really heal.
 Perfect charity heals perfectly.

Bishops Accountability.org is a competent and reliable source of facts and data about the sexual abuse crisis. Richard Sipe's Email: awrsipe@aol.com.

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