

# Father Lasch

personal website

## Project Millstones

**Sunday May 8, 2005**

It was 2,000 years ago, but Jesus' words have never rung truer than they do today. As quoted in the New Testament, [Matthew 18:5-6](#), he said that "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea." The same chapter of Matthew's Gospel speaks of Christian ways to confront sinners and the necessity of forgiveness in living the Gospel of Jesus. All sinfulness creates "millstones" around the necks of us all.

Project Millstones seeks to remove those millstones for the sake of healing within our Church by balancing these contrasting statements of judgment and mercy in the midst of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. According to [Exodus 34, 5-9](#), God forgives "wickedness and crime and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless."

For years, many of us Catholics have remained silent or concealed these serious problems to protect the Church institution and its clergy. We realize now more than ever the sinfulness of such actions. These failures weigh like heavy millstones around the necks of all of us who participated in permitting this problem to develop.

Bishop Wilton Gregory, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in responding to the release of the two reports on the clergy sexual abuse scandal, stated that this issue is now "history" and that, if bishops were complicit in the problem, they can be dealt with within the Conference through "fraternal correction."

We respectfully but strongly disagree with Bishop Gregory's views. Our hierarchical leadership has reluctantly begun to face this problem, but it will only be dealt with completely and effectively when the bishops themselves acknowledge their own role in the scandal. This failure to respond has laid a very heavy millstone around the necks of our Episcopal leaders – a burden which needs to be lifted if they are ever to lead the church effectively and credibly.

Robert Bennett, in presenting the John Jay Survey and the National Review Board Report, has placed the primary responsibility on our bishops themselves for creating the climate and culture in which cover-ups, stonewalling, brutal legal tactics, gag orders, silencing of victims and secretive transfer of perpetrators developed as the actual policy. In most instances sexual abuse of the young by the clergy is symptomatic of a serious sexual disorder. This behavior is also criminal in nature according to both the canon and civil law.

The bishops' complicity is related to a systemic evil in the Church's style and structure of governance. One treats a disease and contains its disastrous effects. One expunges systemic evil.

A small percentage of priests who have been involved in sexual abuse have had to leave active ministry. But a large majority of our bishops, who were clearly complicit in these behaviors by transferring and covering for abusive priests, still remain in office. They publicly apologize and profess their sorrow, but

they exempt themselves from any sanctions and have no fear of the “zero tolerance” policy which they decreed for priests. Why? Is there a double standard? Is not criminal behavior the same whether committed by a bishop or a priest?

We affirm what Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit has stated: ” ‘Zero tolerance’ has been the cruel response rendered to priests by the bishops, while bishops escape such penalties even though it was they who constantly hid the grave problems by secretly moving guilty priests from one place to another. I have found that nothing causes greater anger on the part of lay people and greater loss of credibility in episcopal leadership than this double standard. We can only hope that Voice of the Faithful and other lay groups will have the stamina to persist in their efforts to hold the bishops accountable and to bring structural reform to the church.”

Project Millstones states with compassionate conviction: Unless and until the bishops who – at least after 1985 – have been seriously negligent and complicit leave office, the respect and trust rightly due the body of bishops will be sadly in short and severely strained supply.

### MILLSTONE’S PROPOSALS

First, Project Millstones calls upon the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to expand the charge to its National Review Board to investigate claims against bishops who were complicit in the abuse scandal, at least after 1985 when it became clear that priest predators should not be in active ministry. The Board would then make recommendations for removal or resignation based upon the facts in each bishop’s case.

While we are troubled with the notion of zero tolerance, we accept it reluctantly as an appropriate response to abusive priests in the wake of life long damage to the souls of thousands of innocent victims of sexual abuse. Yet we insist that accused clerics be accorded the due process that is their right in Canon and Civil law and that allegations be investigated by an objective, professional and non-church affiliated entity. Only then will Zero Tolerance have credibility and be a reflection of justice for victims.

With Bishop Gumbleton, we are dismayed by the readiness of our bishops to impose this penalty on abusive priests while at the same time exempting themselves from any sanction beyond a public apology which conforms more to empty institutional rhetoric than to heartfelt compassion. Fraternal correction surely should include the courageous expectation that bishops complicit in a cover-up would humbly resign from their position of leadership.

Second, Project Millstones calls upon all persons to report to the National Review Board any incidents of episcopal complicity in the sexual abuse scandal with which they may be acquainted;

Third, Project Millstones calls upon all victims of clergy/religious sexual abuse who have not yet shared their abuse with anyone privately or publicly to come forward to the appropriate ecclesiastical and civil authorities. These persons wear a particularly heavy millstone around their necks, since they suffer needlessly in silence.

Fourth, Project Millstones seeks a further clarification by the Conference of Bishops and the National Review Board on the exact meaning of sexual abuse;

Fifth, Project Millstones calls for a deep dialogue to be engaged among the leadership and all of the members of the Church in the United States regarding the best way to share leadership in our Church. We stand in solidarity with VOTF in calling for a change in the structures of governance in the Church we have long served and deeply love.

Finally, none of this can be done outside the context of profound and shared prayer and to this we pledge ourselves as we launch Project Millstones.

In the writings of St. John of the Cross we learn that “The Dark Night” is where God approaches making space and purifying — making space for the gift of the forgiving and liberating God Self in human history. Our prayer is for Light in this ‘dark night’ for our Church in the United States.

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\*If you are willing and able to add your signature to over 500 others who had signed, please do so in the space provided below and return it to me. I will transmit your signature to Father Patrick Collins who is the facilitator of this initiative.

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