

"Get a life - it's over!"

At our vigil last month, as we distributed our handouts, one of our volunteers was told to "get a life" and to go home because "it's over." In other words, the clergy sex abuse scandal, the trivialization and criminal mishandling of credible allegations of abuse by bishops, the need for the disclosure of the location of all clergy, religious and church employees who have been removed from their ministries because of credible allegations, the continued cover-up that protects abusers, all of these concerns had disappeared and were history. There would be no further need for our presence here, distributing the news that you don't get to see in diocesan publications or in your parish bulletin. And then the following article, from the Pottstown, PA Mercury News, was brought to our attention. This could have happened anywhere:

Suit: Priest Impregnated Berks County teenager

Saturday, August 28, 2010

By Michael Rubinkam, Associated Press Writer

ALLENTOWN — A Berks County couple secretly videotaped a Roman Catholic priest having sex with their 18-year-old daughter in the basement of their home and are now suing, saying he got her pregnant. The lawsuit, filed Thursday in Berks County Court, alleges that the Rev. Luis A. Bonilla Margarito carried on a sexual relationship with the teen while he was the chaplain of Reading Central Catholic High School and she was a senior there. The girl's parents became suspicious and installed a camera in their basement, where Bonilla and the teen were spending large amounts of time. The camera recorded the couple having sex in November 2009, after she had graduated, according to the suit.

Bonilla and the teen are now evidently living with each other. On Friday, an Associated Press reporter knocked on the door of the apartment in Norristown where Bonilla now lives. A woman answered, and she identified herself as the teen named in the lawsuit filed by her parents. She declined to comment, and would not get Bonilla to come to the door. David Weldon, a maintenance man at the apartment complex, said the couple moved in together two or three months ago, and that she had the baby about six weeks ago.

Bonilla was removed from his dual posts as chaplain and pastor of St. Joseph Church in Reading after her parents took the sex tape to the Diocese of Allentown. He acknowledged at the time an "inappropriate relationship" with the teen, according to a diocesan news release from last November. Bonilla was sent to a treatment facility, but "continued to have intimate contact with (the teen) during this time period and ultimately impregnated her," the suit said. She gave birth to a girl.

Bonilla, 41, left the treatment facility at some point and moved into the two-story complex of brick garden apartments in Norristown, a suburb of Philadelphia. "He has no assignment and he has not functioned as a priest since November," diocesan spokesman Matt Kerr said Friday.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, a support group for victims of clergy abuse, released a statement Friday calling on the Allentown diocese to find out whether Bonilla had an inappropriate relationship with anyone else. "History, research and experience has taught us that predators rarely have only one victim. We fear others who have been hurt are trapped in silence and self blame," said Barbara Dorris, SNAP's outreach director.

Bonilla was named the chaplain of Central Catholic in 2008 and befriended the teen, then 17, at the beginning of her senior year. Bonilla "began to groom (the teen) for a sexual relationship," the suit said, knowing that she suffered from mental health issues, was previously sexually abused by an adult man, and was "susceptible to being manipulated." Her parents began to suspect a relationship and reported their concerns to administrators at Central Catholic, "but were told their suspicions were unfounded and that nothing could be done to separate (the teen) and Father Bonilla because he was her spiritual advisor and/or counselor," according to the suit. Bonilla also took steps to alienate the teen from her parents, telling her that she was 18 and no longer had to obey them, the suit said.

The suit, filed by Wyomissing attorney Jay Abramowitch, charged that diocesan officials knew about the relationship but were "so concerned about their own reputation and/or financial interests, that they failed to protect (the teen) from Father Bonilla." The parents say they are alienated from their daughter as a result of her relationship with Bonilla, and are seeking punitive damages for breach of fiduciary duty, infliction of emotional distress and gross negligence. The suit names as defendants Bonilla, the diocese, the high school, Allentown Bishop John Barres, and former Bishop Edward Cullen. Kerr said the diocese had not been served with the suit, and declined comment.

This isn't "history" - this happened in August 2010! We've been promised change, we've been told that the Church is doing a better job of dealing with predators, we've been assured that our children are safe. The Diocese of Allentown has a Safe Environment Program, conducts background checks on all employees and volunteers, and has information on its website on reporting abuse, as do most dioceses. Still, this heinous crime occurred.

Until allegations of abuse are taken seriously from the Vatican on down, all the programs in the world will not stop a predator or truly protect our children.

LIVOTF Vigil Committee