

Zero tolerance: When did this happen?

—Nineteenth in a series.—

At their meeting in Dallas in 2002, the bishops of the United States stated as policy:

“...that for even a single act of sexual abuse of a minor — whenever it occurred — which is admitted or established after an appropriate process in accord with canon law, the offending priest or deacon is to be permanently removed from ministry and, if warranted, dismissed from the clerical state.”

This is what is commonly referred to as “zero tolerance.” Does this mean that any priest who is accused anywhere in the United States by anyone will be removed from ministry? Many priests feared that they might be at the mercy of every accuser.

However, that is not what has happened. A number of priests have been accused, but they have not been removed from ministry because the accusation was not credible.

The policy requires that an accused priest either admits to the accusation or that it be verified by appropriate evidence. In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, this means that if a priest denies an allegation of abuse, it will be examined by a thorough investigation. Many of the investigators used have worked for the FBI.

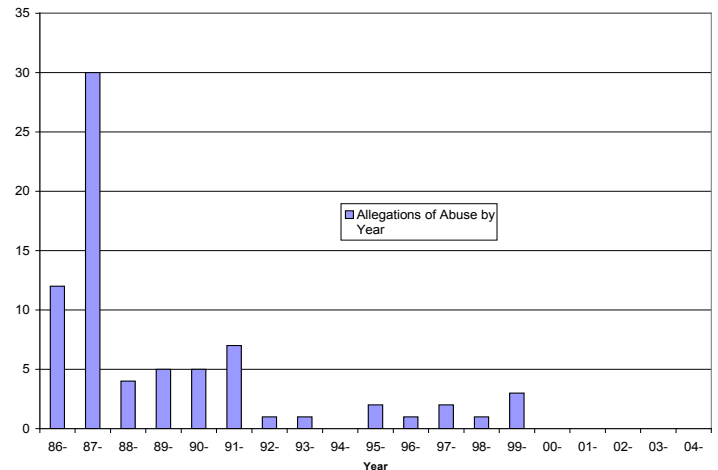
The results of this investigation then go before the Clergy Misconduct Oversight Board, which is made up almost entirely of lay people. If the investigation substantiates the allegation, the priest involved will be removed from ministry. However, dismissal from the clerical state must be the outcome of a trial held in accordance with canon law.

Since 2002, some Catholics have been critical of “zero tolerance.” They argue, for example, that there is a difference between a priest who is psychologically distressed and had a pattern of offending and a priest who committed one offense decades ago but has reformed and has led a dedicated life since. Perhaps the policy will be reviewed in the future, but for the moment it appears that the majority of the laity and clergy support it.

While the press sometimes gives the impression that the bishops adopted a zero tolerance policy because of the proliferation of abuse by clergy exposed by the media beginning in 2002, that was far from the case. The Church had been dealing with the terrible problem of clerical sexual abuse for years, and by 2002, that abuse had thankfully almost ceased.

The accompanying chart illustrates the incidents

of alleged sexual abuse of minors by clergy in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles since the mid-1980s. It is important to remember that the vast majority of these charted allegations were not reported until 2002-2003, rather than in the years they allegedly took place.



Prior to 2002, bishops had worked with therapy centers to determine whether priests accused of sexual abuse of minors could safely be returned to a limited and supervised ministry. This was the universal approach to the problem. A now famous report to the bishops in 1985 compiled by Rev. Thomas Doyle and Mr. Ray Mouton, recommended this same approach.

However, progressively in the years before 2002, Los Angeles used this solution less and less. In February of 2002, several months before the bishops adopted the Charter in Dallas, accused priests from Los Angeles who had undergone treatment and been placed in limited ministry were removed from that ministry.

Dealing with clerical sexual abuse has been a difficult and painful process. It involved past mistakes and present regrets on the part of anyone involved in it. However, it is probably true to say that the Church is now the safest place for children in our society.

The policy of zero tolerance may be reviewed in the future. However, the principal policy of the Church is to create a situation wherein there will be zero incidents of sexual abuse by clergy in the future.

This weekly series of feature stories, commentary and analysis is compiled and edited by an advisory group to the Media Relations Office of the Archdiocese, through which the articles are distributed.