

## **Lessons in crisis communication: How one parish emerged from a sex abuse scandal even stronger**

**By Anne Curley**

By now you would think we'd have figured out how to share information about allegations of clergy sexual abuse without making matters worse. Yet even all these years after the Boston blow-up, hardly a week goes by without some story that suggests many Church leaders still are not applying proven principles of crisis communication.

Speaking as a Catholic who makes a living giving communication advice, it pains me to see the needless hurt and disaffection that have resulted. It's especially frustrating because I know it's possible for a community rocked by charges of abuse to emerge from this crisis stronger. I know because I saw it happen at a parish recently.

### **A case in point**

On the surface, this small faith community might seem an unlikely model for a best-practice case study. Located in a crumbling urban neighborhood, it draws a tight-knit group of grey-haired first-generation Americans from throughout the metro area. Long ago, many of these parishioners moved to nicer neighborhoods. But every weekend – and in some cases, every day -- they come home to the church where they were baptized, from where they expect to be buried. As children, they attended the parish grade school in the 1940s. As parents, they sent their kids there in the 1960s. Both generations idolized the parish priests, who have been supplied by the same religious order for more than 70 years. All the boys spent time as servers. And now it's been alleged, several decades later, that some of them were sexually abused.

When two apparently independent reports concerning the same deceased priest surfaced last spring, the religious order's province leader recruited a psychologist, a lawyer, and – to handle communication -- me. We, the province leader and the pastor began planning a response.

The first priority was clear: begin addressing the specific concerns of the two complainants. But then what? Light a votive candle and pray no other shoes would drop? In the “pre-Boston” era, that might have been the way it played out. Today, especially given that the priest is deceased, many dioceses would have someone draft a stand-by media statement in case the allegations leaked out and *then* move into candle-lighting mode.

But much as they might have preferred to keep this quiet, these priests understood the lesson of Boston. They realized that if two boys had been assaulted, there was a good chance others had been, too. They felt they had an affirmative duty to make it as easy as possible for anyone who had been victimized to come forward, so they could get whatever emotional and spiritual support they needed to recover. On a more self-

interested level, they didn't want to be vulnerable to threats of exposure and charges of a cover-up.

But how do you get proactive about such an awful situation without shredding the fabric of a tight-knit, conservative little parish? How do you share such ugly information without "scandalizing the faithful"? The answer is deceptively simple: You trust in the *wisdom* of the faithful.

### **Seeking counsel from the Council**

The response team began preparing to disclose the allegations to parishioners. Knowing this would likely lead to media inquiries, they developed an extensive Q. and A. document, thinking through how best to respond to the toughest questions they could imagine. A letter from the pastor to parishioners was drafted. Handouts providing background information on pedophilia and related issues were assembled. Several other counselors were enlisted.

Next came one of the most important steps of all: The pastor called a special meeting of the parish council. The next evening, not knowing why they'd been called together, all but one council member was on hand. The pastor briefly explained the situation and told them he needed their advice on how to proceed. He passed out copies of the draft letter to parishioners, which provided more details – including the name of the alleged abuser. The room fell silent. Council members read and re-read the letter. Then emotions began to bubble up.

Shock: "He was such a good man. I can't believe he could have done this."

Skepticism: "Who *says* he did this? How do I know I can trust these reports if I don't know who's making them?"

Belief: "I'd heard rumors..."

Devastation and tears: "He married us. He was like family."

The pastor told the group he was thinking of sharing the news from the pulpit at weekend Masses and then sending the letter to all parishioners. This would be a way to reach out to anyone else who had been abused. Also important, it would ensure that parishioners heard the news from the proper source, instead of through the grapevine or the newspaper should the story leak out.

On the other hand, he acknowledged, this would forever stain the reputation of a person who was unable to defend himself against allegations that were credible but unproven. An alternative would be to mention the allegations without disclosing the name of the priest. But keeping the name secret would create uncertainty and needless anxiety among parishioners. It would cast a cloud over the reputations of dozens of other priests who had served the parish. And these harmful effects would likely be long-lasting, given the

remote prospect of conclusively proving or disproving allegations that dated back more than 30 years, about a man who had since died.

Having laid out the tentative plan and the rationale behind it, the pastor asked council members for their opinions. The discussion that ensued was a model of thoughtful, productive dialog.

Council members asked probing questions: How could this have gone undiscovered at the time? Why would someone wait this long to come forward? What are they looking to gain? They argued the merits of various approaches: We shouldn't send a letter because it will end up in the newspaper; We *have* to send a letter or the information will get distorted. They debated the fairness of disclosing the priest's identity: It's wrong to attack someone who can't defend himself; But why would anyone invent such a terrible story about someone who's been dead for years? And what are the odds that two people, independent of each other, would make up similar stories?

In the end, the council worked its way to the same conclusions the response team had reached. The group voted unanimously to endorse the action plan and asked that the letter be amended to note the Council's support. Before adjourning, they discussed the importance of confidentiality and decided it was best not even to disclose the information to their spouses.

### **“Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed”**

The news remained a well kept secret for two days, until the Mass of Anticipation on Saturday evening. The first reading was an anguished lament from Jeremiah. The gospel reading was uncannily apropos: “Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known...” After proclaiming the gospel, the pastor spoke briefly about the readings and then discussed the abuse allegations. Following are excerpts from his prepared text:

*“Like Jeremiah, we all experience suffering as part of life. Some of us get off easier than Jeremiah, but some of us have experiences that plunge us into the kind of torment that Jeremiah had to suffer. Jeremiah did a good job of expressing his anguish and crying out for help. Jesus did the same during the agony in the garden. But sometimes, people keep their suffering to themselves, figuring no one can help them or no one will take them seriously or no one will care. That's not good.*

*“As we watch the current crisis in the Catholic Church unfold, we see people who have suffered in silence, often for many years, coming forward to express their pain and ask for help. That is good. Today, I want to tell you about something that's happened at our parish that has brought this close to home...”*

After recounting the allegations and encouraging anyone else who had been hurt to come forward, he concluded by saying:

*“The hand of the Holy Spirit is at work here. As Matthew tells us, ‘Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known.’ Throughout the country, we are seeing some terrible secrets revealed. The big question is, ‘How will we respond to the pain and sinfulness that’s now being revealed?’*

*“Our challenge as a Church and as a parish is to respond in a way that reveals the abundance of God’s grace. We need to respond with compassion. We need to respond in a way that encourages anyone who is suffering in silence to come forward and express their pain, so we can help them find the emotional and spiritual support they need to heal.*

*“As we grapple with this challenge and all the challenges and hurts and setbacks life throws at us, the good news is that God loves us beyond our wildest comprehension. ‘Even all the hairs of your head are counted,’ Matthew tells us in today’s Gospel. ‘So do not be afraid’.”*

As he spoke, the pastor’s voice occasionally quivered. When he finished, the church was dead quiet. Then someone began to clap. In a moment everyone was standing and clapping. It wasn’t happy applause; It was a somber expression of solidarity. Perhaps more than that, this unexpected reaction seemed to reflect an instinctive understanding that parishioners had just experienced a level of openness and respect that was out of the ordinary.

The following Tuesday, parishioners received the pastor’s letter. Soon it was in the hands of the news media. That afternoon the council president, representing the parish, and I, representing the order, met with reporters. The next morning, the local daily newspaper carried a front page story headlined, “Church openness on abuse praised.” The story began:

“Parishioners of (the parish) are praising the openness with which their church handled claims of a sexually abusive priest. During mass on Sunday, members were told that a former priest might have sexually abused boys nearly 30 years ago. In telling his congregation the news, (the pastor) said he wanted to be proactive and upfront. Members said they appreciated that, even giving him a standing ovation.”

### **Eight proven principles made the difference**

This story, of course, isn’t over. For those suffering the aftereffects of abuse, it may never be over. And any story that begins with the sexual abuse of minors is never going to have a happy ending. But parishioners have continued to deal well with the situation, with many expressing pride in the way their pastor and parish council handled it.

For them and all the people who could have been injured or reinjured by the mishandling of these allegations, the management of this crisis made a huge difference in the way it played out. The difference boils down to following eight key principles:

1. **Keep your priorities straight.** It's a terrible mistake to start thinking of a human tragedy as a public relations problem. To "keep it real" the response team's first two guiding principles stated:

- Our foremost concern will be to help victims obtain the emotional and spiritual support they need to recover.
- We will cooperate with law enforcement authorities to prevent and deter sexual abuse of minors.

To back up these statements, the order installed and repeatedly publicized an 800-number telephone line to make it as easy as possible for people to seek help or share information. It gave victims various counseling options. And it initiated contact with local law enforcement officials even though the alleged offender was deceased.

2. **Take control of the situation before it takes control of you.** Anticipate and plan for the worst-case scenario. Then move, don't wait. Don't wait to do the right thing until someone forces you to, and don't wait to tell your key constituencies until they find out from someone else. Be proactive because it's morally right, but know that it's also in your best interest. You'll have far greater leverage and get far more credit if you act instead of reacting. In this case, the response team made a concerted effort to compress the timeline as much as possible, both to be responsive to victims and to stay on top of the situation.
3. **Identify your key constituencies** and tailor a communication plan for each group. For instance: Don't treat your priests the same as everyone else. Be sure to keep victims/survivors apprised of your broader communication plans so they're not taken by surprise. Think through who will be hit hardest by the news and how you can make it easier for them.
4. **Use normal decision-making bodies** as much as possible. You've asked certain people to serve in leadership positions on an ongoing basis. Try not to pull an end run on them by turning this matter over to an ad hoc group and leaving them out in the cold. In this instance, the Parish Council welcomed the fact that the order had recruited outside experts. But the outsiders worked in partnership with Council members, rather than in place of them. Obviously, confidentiality is a major concern, so you want to keep the inner circle as limited as possible. But this consideration must be balanced against the benefit of sharing ownership of the issue with the parish leadership team.
5. **Follow the right communication sequence.** There needn't be much lag time between one audience and the next, but be sure to honor each audience's rightful "place in line" when it comes to sharing information. In this case, the sequence was, first, fellow priests, next the Parish Council, back to the victims/survivors to inform them of the agreed-upon communication plan, then parishioners. When the news media got wind of the story, we were ready for them. But we didn't initiate media coverage; we took a more organic approach to disseminating the news.
6. **Use normal communication sources and channels** as much as possible. If the subject is parish-based, the pastor should be the primary information source for parishioners. Better still would be a very visible communication partnership between the pastor and the parish council president. When the subject is sensitive, it's best to start with face-to-face communication whenever possible, and then follow with something in writing to put the facts in the hands of everyone. Media inquiries can be

handled by a trained spokesperson, but avoid issuing actual press releases; you don't want to contribute to the making of a "media event".

7. **Treat key constituents as partners, not audiences.** People who are members of a community – people who belong to a parish or priests who belong to an order, for example – shouldn't be viewed as an audience to whom you are trying to *sell* something. Rather, they are partners in the enterprise who need to be engaged in dialog ... partners who should have an opportunity to influence outcomes that will affect them whenever possible. If you want people to feel a sense of ownership in an organization or an outcome, they must feel as though they had a meaningful opportunity to influence it. This doesn't mean they have to get their way; People can accept a decision with which they disagree. It simply means they must have an authentic opportunity to influence the outcome. They must believe their voice was truly heard.
8. **Keep your logic transparent.** In attempting to win belief or acceptance, the goal should not be to sell people through persuasive rhetoric, "trust-me" assertions, or other forms of internal marketing. Instead, the idea is to lay out all the key pieces of information in the logic train that produced a decision or recommendation – the options examined, the major pros and cons of each, the relevant precedents, etc. – so that people can decide for themselves whether your logic holds water. In the world of marketing, they call this "fact-based selling." It comes down to letting people sell *themselves* – or not.

The best example in this case was the decision to identify the alleged offender. If the pastor had simply said, "Be assured I've thought this through carefully and feel confident this is the best way to handle this," he wouldn't have received nearly the same level of support from council members. By laying out his logic and letting them wrestle through it themselves, he gained informed backing for the decision. If your logic isn't strong enough to withstand this kind of scrutiny, it's better to realize it sooner rather than later, so you can promptly take the decision back to the drawing board. If this occurs, don't see it as a failure; consider it a golden opportunity to send the message that people's voices *are* heard here, and to create a better, more broadly owned, solution.

In conclusion, let me state what should be obvious. The people in the pews every week love the Church. But there is a vast, untapped potential for us to love it more and give it more of ourselves if Church leaders will treat us as full partners in the enterprise. We can take the truth. We *expect* the truth. And when Church leaders share it with us openly, engage us in dialog, and allow us our rightful influence on outcomes that affect us, they will be amazed and relieved to see how forgiving, wise and strong we can be.

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