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Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Some
Thoughts on Contested Meanings

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Synopsis

The author, whose research and experience with child sexual abuse crosses continents and cultures, draws attention to some of the ambiguities inherent in talking about "prevention" and the underlying issues of meaning and power.

About the Author

Alberto Godenzi is Professor and Dean of the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work. His research interests include interpersonal violence, peace and conflict, gender and society and HIV/AIDS. He has published extensively in the United States and in Europe, and has social work experience in a number of countries and fields. In January, 2002, Cardinal Law appointed him to be part of the diocesan taskforce developing a strategy for the protection of children from sexual abuse.

In the wake of the current child sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, few would disagree that preventing child sexual abuse is a noble, albeit not easy task. But little attention has been paid to the multiple contexts in which talk of "prevention" has occurred. The process of preventing something always implies a context that supplies the values involved. For instance, some people want to prevent child sexual abuse through the ordination of women because they see the roots of the problem in an all-male and celibate clergy. Others want to prevent harm to children by establishing mandatory criminal background checks for seminarians and may not assert the need for women's access to ordination. The term "prevention" can be applied to both situations, even though different values and interests are involved.

Prevention, further, may have unintended consequences. It is possible we might prevent something "good" from occurring, like a close and positive relationship between a priest and a child, in order to prevent something "bad" from occurring, such as child sexual abuse. No matter which way we turn as we confront the situation of child sexual abuse, we will need to recognize, and engage, a multiplicity of values. The way to find a basis for our prevention focus towards child sexual abuse is to enter the market of values open-mindedly.

Prevention implies taking action before anticipated problems arise. But what actually constitutes a "problem" has perhaps never been so debated as it is today. And aren't some problems more urgent than others? If problems are constructed in a marketplace where different parties negotiate and debate the terms of trade and the accuracy of transactions, then the current marketplace has focused our attention on the sexual abuse of children by clergy. But other, hard questions remain: is, for instance, child sexual abuse by priests more noteworthy than abuse by biological fathers? Merely looking at the extent of the problem,

sexual abuse by fathers seems much more prevalent than the same abuse by priests. However, there are more biological fathers than spiritual fathers, and the prevalence rate of clergy sexual abuse has yet to be determined.

No one doubts that if we invest time and energy in implementing prevention policies, we are doing something good. We want to empower children and parents, reduce risks, increase life chances, and contribute to healthy social relationships between priests and children. On the surface, these all appear to be perfectly acceptable goals. But what we might consider "empowerment" of children or lay men and women may look very different to, and may contradict the values of, the Church, and its firm belief in the good of a hierarchical structure. To what extent is the Church interested in developing democratic structures and a culture of openness? At what point does risk reduction, which benefits the community of children, have negative effects on its key values? Does increasing participation mean losing control of the laity? Is the Church ready for such a renewal?

Local reaction suggests that the Church has little interest in wanting the faithful to form networks and support groups. Does the word faithful, taken from the "institutional" Church's point of view, imply that we must have unbending faith in the leadership of the hierarchy? Following this logic, the Voice of the Faithful, despite its motto of "Save the Faith, Change the Church," might be regarded, by the Church, as the Voice of the Critics.

The question most freighted with values goes to those key words, "we" and "Church"? Is there anyone out there who could claim to be on neutral and safe ground between interested parties? Can academics balance the needs, values, and goals of different people? Or has academia not always taken sides? Have not some of the most astounding discoveries been made out of passion, rather than objectivity?

Although prevention as a theoretical concept implies that we want to inhibit the occurrence of negative events and promote positive outcomes, the definition of what is negative or positive is always contingent. The recent episcopal decisions at Dallas bear this out. When the Bishops in Dallas promoted a light version of a Zero Tolerance policy, many saw it as a positive outcome that would help to dissuade potential abusers. Others saw it as a negative development because you couldn't rule out false accusations and you might demoralize the many good priests. Now, false accusation is an integral part of any crime phenomenon, not just child sexual abuse, and the evidence collected so far does not show that there are more false accusations in child sexual abuse cases than in other violent offenses. Has anyone ever suggested that we stop investigating other crimes just because it might affect the morale of law-abiding citizens? False accusation, regrettable as it is, may be one price of an effective strategy to protect children.

Prevention is as much about values as it is about seeking to forestall predictable undesirable events. When we want to prevent something from happening, we must take sides against this something and everything supporting its development.

For further reading

Godenzi, A. & De Puy, J. (2001). Overcoming boundaries: a cross-cultural inventory of primary prevention programs against wife abuse and child abuse. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 21, 4, 455-475.