

'Police, church, province failed'

Ontario government singled out for censure

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CORNWALL - Police, government, the Catholic Church and other institutions failed to respond to decades of alleged and real child sexual abuse here by probation officers, clergy, teachers and others, a public inquiry has found.

In a devastating 2,400-word report, Cornwall Inquiry Commissioner Normand Glaude found a combination of systemic failures, insensitivity to historic abuse complaints and an official reluctance to act.

"Institutions were reluctant to be forthright and own up to mistakes, fearing scandal or criticism more than they feared the breach of their duty to the vulnerable and the public," Mr. Glaude said in a speech yesterday while unveiling his four-volume report. "For some, this resulted in revictimization by the institutions from whom they sought help."

His exhaustive recounting of the scandal, which surfaced in 1994 based on abuse dating back decades, is made all the more ugly by the report's details of the suicides of two alleged abusers and the drunken homicide of a young man just hours after he and several other young men consumed beer at the home of a corrupt Cornwall probation officer and sexual predator.

In January 1994, word of a \$32,000 non-disclosure agreement between Alexandria-Cornwall Catholic diocese and former altar boy David Silmsler became public. The agreement included an illegal undertaking preventing Mr. Silmsler from pursuing criminal charges against his alleged abuser, Rev. Charles MacDonald. The aging priest was eventually charged with 13 sex crimes against seven males between 1967 and 1983. But the case was stayed by a judge in 2002 because of "unreasonable delays" in prosecuting Rev. Mac-Donald.

The original Silmsler revelation helped trigger the Ontario Provincial Police-led Project Truth investigation and, years later, Mr. Glaude's public inquiry.

Yet after nearly four years of hearings, 167 witnesses, 3,640 written exhibits and an estimated \$50-million cost, the prime question remains: Was a pedophile ring comprised of ranking Cornwall citizens engaged in the ritualistic sexual abuse of vulnerable youths and men?

Citing the inquiry's narrow mandate prohibiting criminal or civil blame, Mr. Glaude deflected the issue yesterday.

"Throughout this inquiry I have heard evidence that suggested there were cases of joint abuse, passing of alleged victims, and possibly passive knowledge of abuse," he wrote. "I want to be very clear that I am not going to make a pronouncement on whether a ring existed or not."

He makes it clear, however, he found no evidence of any official cover-ups. Instead, the report says local institutions ill-equipped to deal with allegations about their own employees, whether a probation officer, teacher, priest or child-care worker, acted defensively and often in self-interest.

Mr. Glaude singled out the Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services for particular censure. The report describes how the ministry took no action against a Cornwall probation supervisor and another employee who failed to properly report two former probation officers who had engaged in sexual and other improprieties with young probationers.

Ontario's Liberal government and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall were quick to issue apologies.

"I sincerely apologize to those who have been affected as a result of these events," said Rick Bartolucci, the province's Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services. "Not only the victims, not only the victims' families, but their friends and the community. At the very least, I am pleased that our government has responded to requests for an inquiry after years of having this issue fester."

However, neither Mr. Bartolucci nor Attorney-General Chris Bentley, who shared the podium at a Queen's Park news conference yesterday afternoon, would commit to implementing any of the

234 recommendations in the report. Mr. Bentley said he had only received the report 24 hours before it was publicly released.

Mr. Bartolucci noted Mr. Glaude's decision to make no conclusion concerning a possible Cornwall pedophile ring.

"At the end of the day, having had to live the experiences that those individuals had to live, I'm sure that no matter how thorough this report could have been -- in some people's eyes, there would have still been questions," he said.

HIGHLIGHTS

The report's recommendations include:

- Record keeping of incidents should be improved.

- An internal investigation is needed if a probation or parole officer is suspected or has been charged with sexual assault or abuse.

- The ministry should consult with justice partners, police and Crown attorneys to develop a protocol for sharing information regarding allegations of sexual abuse or assault.

- The ministry should make a public appeal, urging victims to come forward.

- Police should ensure that historical sexual assault cases are a high priority and treated with the same urgency as recent cases.

- How to investigate sexual assault or abuse should be part of regular police training.

- Police should offer support to victims and their families.

- Police should be required to inform public and religious institutions and justice partners that an allegation of sexual assault or abuse has been made against one of their employees.

- Bishops, priests, employees and volunteers should encourage people who disclose sexual abuse or assault to report the allegation to police.

- The Diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall should have rigorous procedures for evaluating candidates it plans to present for study at its seminary.

Source: Canwest News Service