

SNAP

Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests

August 5, 2004

Carole Shinnick, SSND
Executive Director
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
8808 Cameron Street
Silver Spring, MD 20910-4113

Dear Sister Carol Shinnick:

Jesus says, "... if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead?" Matthew 7:9-10

We are saddened and disappointed in your response to our letter of July 13, 2004.

We understand that you have now totally refused our request (for victims of religious women sexual abuse to speak at your national conference). In response to our invitation, you made a counter-proposal for a smaller, face-to-face meeting prior to your Texas conference within a very short amount of time that required an extreme amount of travel time. Despite our willingness to compromise (we had asked that the dates be changed because of the late notice), we understand that you have now refused our plan as well. This leaves us feeling very discouraged and apprehensive about the prospects of our organizations working together to reach out to victims to alleviate their pain, help them heal and stop the abuse by women religious.

Our letter did apparently not move your hearts, nor did our news conference, the media accounts of our experiences, or phone calls with our David Clohessy. Perhaps you will be moved if we frame this in a different and corporate way, via numbers.

Forty-eight. That's how many years your organization has been around.

Zero. That's how many times the LCWR have reached out to sexual abuse victims of women religious.

Four hundred. The approximate numbers of religious orders that belong to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Zero. The number of women religious orders that have reached out to our group.

Fourteen. The number of years that SNAP has been around.

Fourteen. The number of years our group has been ignored by LCWR.

Forty-three. That's roughly how many national conferences your group has held.

Zero. That's how many times you have heard from a survivor of clergy sex abuse.

Two and a half. That's how many years have passed since the clergy sex abuse crisis publicly erupted in this country.

Zero. That's how many times the LCWR has called or wrote any of us, individually or collectively.

In spite of this, and in spite of our understandable fears and hesitations about approaching women religious authority figures, last month we reached out to the LCWR. We proposed working together. We made one small and simple, but courageous request: for a chance to speak to LCWR members in August at the LCWR annual gathering in Fort Worth.

Let us now cite two more numbers:

Three days. That's how long your Texas conference is scheduled to last.

30 minutes. That's what we've asked for: just one or two survivors to speak for 30 minutes about the most horrific scandal to ever face the American Catholic Church.

You can do what's easiest and most convenient for you.

Or you can compromise with, listen to, and make accommodations for men and women who have been sexually assaulted at the hands of religious women.

You can say "there's just not enough time." Or you can make time.

You can make excuses. Or you can make real efforts toward reconciliation and prevention.

You can grant our one simple wish.

You can be proactive. Or appear defensive.

You can meet a challenge. Or you can run from it.

You can embrace we who are wounded. Or you can stiff arm us.

You can learn from the mistakes of the past. Or you can repeat them.

We didn't consent to being abused and suffering life long consequences.

Our parents didn't consent to our abuse by women religious.

We are now asking the LCWR leaders to consent to our diminutive yet longing request to speak at the Conference in Ft. Worth.

We've asked for bread - a chance to address some 400 heads of religious orders, women who can play a huge role in making the church and world safer for everyone and in healing dozens, perhaps hundreds, of us who have been victimized by abusive sisters and nuns.

Instead, the LCWR offered a stone - an unspecified meeting with a couple of unspecified individuals sometime down the road at your convenience.

Of course we will accept that meeting. We have no choice.

We were abused by women religious in positions of power. The LCWR leadership is extending its position of power at this time.

Besides struggling and laboring with healing, our mission also includes stopping the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults. The LCWR members can facilitate that effort, so we have no choice but to endeavor, no matter how difficult the odds and no matter how betrayed we might feel, to sit down with you. For 14 years, we've done that with virtually every church leader or group that has been willing to listen.

But that meeting will not be easy. Those of us who are already hurt will, sadly and inevitably, feel even more so. Those of us who have difficulty trusting religious authority figures will have even more difficulty.

Healing requires truth and honesty. We hope that someday very soon, the LCWR will acknowledge our hurt but more importantly, the words Jesus taught us.

Let us also point out that we never were even given the opportunity to discuss what day, what time, what topics, what individuals might be able to address your group. We've just been told no - unilaterally, unequivocally no; not even a hint or pretense of potential compromise. Just an uncaring refusal.

In your letter to us and in conversations with David Clohessy, another survivor of religious sexual abuse, you mentioned two reasons why you would not allow us to speak at the Assembly. Neither seems credible.

First, you said you would feel it's better if we first meet in a smaller group. Non-

victims fortunately, do not have the ability to know what is best for survivors. We find the LCWR is very ignorant on this matter and hence the need to speak - to educate. The signors below realize that we are the privileged ones for we survived and continue to survive. Many of our brothers and sisters of abuse could not survive with their pain. Your suggestion may make sense to you. It doesn't to us. Given the gravity of the crisis and the time that has already elapsed, we feel it would be far more beneficial if we could talk with your whole membership at one time.

Second, you talk about time constraints. Sister, let's be honest. We are asking for 30 minutes. We will speak at any time you give us...first thing in the morning or last at night. We have been to conferences over our years and we know that you could find 30 minutes for us if you sincerely wanted to work with us.

That said, we were willing to compromise. We still are. If you want to meet prior to the Texas conference, we'll move heaven and earth to make that meeting happen. But now, even though you proposed such a get-together, you're reversing yourselves and saying no to even a smaller meeting in the coming weeks.

Sisters, we all know that "where there's a will, there's a way." We know that conference schedules change. We know that helping the needy is not always convenient. We know that living as Jesus would is not always easy. But, we do know that Jesus would embrace us. And we know that if you sincerely want to help abuse victims, you'll hear us. You know that in the larger scheme of things, one half hour at one meeting is indeed possible.

The LCWR refusal to allow us to speak does not speak well of the "trust" that when the LCWR proclaims "brokenness can be healed."

The LCWR stated in its *STATEMENT OF LCWR NATIONAL BOARD CONCERNING SEXUAL ABUSE* that "Thus, we call upon our members to join our pledge to continue working from a contemplative stance for reconciliation and for a more inclusive and open church."

We hope you will include us in the Conference which would meet your pledge and again are still hopeful that you will work with us in our request. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Steve Theisen
Landa Mauriello-Vernon
Mary Guentner
Jack Lavino
(No Longer Bystanders)