Many of the responses by the Catholic Church to pedophilia among its ranks implicitly assume that it is a curable disease.

Until this year, priests who were caught were often transferred to another parish, in part out of the hope that they had learned their lesson. Recently, the pope, while calling sexual abuse a crime, also called for drawing on "the power of Christian conversion . . . [which] can work extraordinary change."

This assumes that priests will be able to overcome this horrible malady. Moreover, scores of priests have been sent to church-sponsored institutes - for instance, St. Luke's Institute in Silver Spring, Md. - dedicated to curing pedophiles. (Father John Geoghan from the Boston area, recently charged with numerous abuses, is the graduate of two such institutes.)

The sad truth is that pedophilia is almost never cured. I spent a year reviewing the data on numerous attempts to treat this illness. I turned to study the matter when civil libertarians demanded the repeal of Megan's Laws, which require notification of communities into which pedophiles are released. Such notifications are said to be justified precisely because pedophiles are much more likely than other criminals to be repeat offenders.

Pedophilia is not a normal sex drive but an obsession, a strong impulse difficult to control. It has been compared with alcoholism, and characterized as "a chronic, progressive condition that can never really be cured."

The fact that pedophiles are rarely cured is reflected in the fact that even if jailed and treated, they continue to act out their impulse. When I studied the matter, I first ran into a puzzle: Studies of recidivism (re-arrest or reconviction) of sex offenders show very different results.

Some find that more than half of those released from treatment centers have been convicted again (56 percent, according to a study conducted by the Massachusetts Post Audit Bureau); others find that this is true only for less than 5 percent of those who completed their treatment.

A closer examination showed that the studies that came out with low rates of recidivism included in their definition of sex offenders teenagers who engaged in premarital sex in public spaces and other such acts that are legally an offense in some jurisdictions, but offer no indication of compulsion. Even for studies that show a high rate, the question remained, what about the others? Thus if 56 percent of the "graduates" of treatment facilities in Massachusetts were rearrested for the same offense, were the remaining 44 percent cured?

The puzzle was solved when I came across re-offense data, which sounds similar to re-arrest data but is not. Re-offense figures concern how often the same criminal act has been repeated by the same person - whether or not they have been caught.

We know that on average, pedophiles commit 13 abuses before they are caught. We know this because once they are arrested, they admit to the other offenses or other victims come forward.

Hence, my study of Megan's Laws concluded that far from being excessive, these laws are too weak.
What are parents to do once they are informed that a new neighbor is a known child molester and very likely to re-offend? Accompany their children whenever they play outdoors, walk to a friend's house or to school? Keep the children locked up at home?

Several states, fully cognizant of the limits of Megan's Laws, enacted much stronger laws: the Sexual Predator Acts. These allow public authorities to keep pedophiles locked in state mental hospitals - after they have completed their jail sentence.

The Supreme Court ruled that these acts are constitutional - because the claim is made that the offenders are held in these hospitals for treatment purposes, and holding them there does not amount, in effect, to preventive incarceration.

Regrettably, if we are to spare children much more abuse, and if one agrees that priests should not be treated differently from other mortals who commit major crimes, such hospitals are the place many of these priests will end up, until an effective cure is found.

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