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Forgive and forget? That's up to parish

Publication	Kane County Chronicle
Date	September 03, 2006
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When is an apology an apology?

It is easy to say, "Sorry." It is much more difficult to mean it.

The same can be said for forgiveness.

It is easy to say the word but more demanding to live the sentiment.

Forgiveness is the complicated teaching that has challenged parishioners at St. Peter Parish in Geneva, possibly the most influential Catholic institution in central Kane County.

The Rev. Msgr. Joseph Jarmoluk leads the flock. For the past six years, he has done so while carrying the weight of Mark Campobello, a former priest serving eight years in prison for sexually abusing two young women, one when she attended the parish's grade school, the other as a student at Aurora Central Catholic High School.

To his critics, Jarmoluk has become as much a villain as Campobello. Jarmoluk insists that he reported the allegations to his superiors in the Rockford Diocese within minutes of being told the name of the victim, the name of the perpetrator, and the name of the teacher in whom the victim confided. Critics contend that such a three-pronged test is ridiculous and that Jarmoluk previously had enough information to suspect abuse.

The difference is significant and at the heart of discord in the parish.

Tensions already were high in a religious organization that struggles with core questions from its congregants. The priest sex-abuse scandal deeply divided Catholics across the world, making comfortable people compare which sin was worse: abusing a child or not acting to prevent it from happening again.

Then the allegations hit home, and critics demanded specific answers. After all, this was not about missing church money or a questionable hire at the school. This involved a child.

One abuse occurred. Could one have been prevented?

There might be nothing more important to a parent than a child. And such suspicions should be reported immediately.

But what has been lost here is that there might be nothing more important to a priest than the church. If there is no credible allegation, does reporting the suspicion do more harm than good?

It is the unstoppable object slamming into an immovable force. And when specific answers were not forthcoming, the discord became personal.

When emotion takes over, odd decisions are made. We want to win more than we want to be productive. We begin to be consumed with the fight instead of remembering why it is that we are fighting.

A personal apology never did come, and critics of the parish sought to launch a criminal investigation. **Jarmoluk** responded by hiring a private attorney and threatening lawsuits.

Others were brought into the fight. A documentary film project was launched. The anonymity of the Internet brought the venom to a completely new level.

And then, out of the silence, an order from the diocese instructing **Jarmoluk** to apologize. To dismiss his attorney that he paid for with his personal funds. To direct the movie people to stop.

Jarmoluk said he would because he was told to do so. He said he would apologize, but for exactly what we are not sure.

Many lessons have been presented to the St. Peter community in the past six years. Many challenges have been presented. Many answers offered.

Those answers are no more clear today than they were years ago.

What is clear, however, is that the answers will stand. The parish can accept or reject them. The fight must end.

The parish can go back to debating when an apology is an apology, when forgiveness actually occurs, and how healing truly can take place.

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