



March 19, 2019

Committee on Public Safety  
The California State Senate  
Legislative Office Building  
1020 N Street, Room 111  
Sacramento, California 95814

Re: Support — SB 360

To the Members of the Committee on Public Safety,

When I was growing up in Cypress Park, California, in the late 1950s, like so many of our neighbors, I trusted that my Catholic community and education would help me to rise out of poverty, hunger, and shame. I was an altar boy, and my mother was a pillar in our parish, organizing whatever needed to be done and volunteering countless hours at the church.

We held priests in the highest esteem, even when some of their behavior seemed questionable, such as their drinking, sexualized joking, and entertainment habits. And so my mother was thrilled that our parish priest, Monsignor Leland Boyer, told her that he thought I, at the age of 13, had a vocation to join the priesthood and could work in the rectory while he served as my mentor.

Mons. Boyer would invite me to stay overnight at the rectory, take me on overnight trips to luxurious vacation homes, and bring me gifts from his various trips. But all this came at a price, as he had also begun to repeatedly sexually abuse me. Soon, a diocesan worker joined him in victimizing me. The abuse continued for three years. At the time, I had no idea that I was the victim of multiple crimes relating to the sexual abuse of a minor and was too ashamed to speak to anyone about it. So I kept silent and psychologically disassociated as a survival tool.

Nevertheless, my psyche was profoundly affected. In high school, I developed a rage that I expressed through sports. I was overcome by a fierce competitiveness that kept me isolated and fueled self-destructive behavior that ultimately jeopardized my ability to succeed in college.

As a result of the abuse I suffered as a child, the hope that I had once possessed about my future—that hinged on the belief that being a part of a Catholic community would provide me with the tools and faith I needed to become a healthy, successful adult—was crushed.

In 2002, the *Boston Globe* broke the news of the Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal, and, for the first time, years of memories broke through my consciousness. Then next ten years were full of anguish, as I tried to navigate such pain, but I eventually found effective therapies that helped relieve the triggers and rage that had tortured me for so many years. I became an activist, dedicated to exposing clergy sexual abuse.

Today, I serve as a United Church of Christ Minister for Healing and Healthy Environments in San Diego. I am a hospice chaplain and the President of the Child-Friendly Faith Project, a nonprofit organization that raises awareness of religious child maltreatment. These are ways that I integrate my own hurting, healing, and helping in an attempt to end child sexual abuse.

Part of that journey is to communicate to you the importance of putting safeguards in place so that children are not victimized. Senate Bill 360 is one such safeguard. If, when I was young, clergy had been mandated reporters without exception, it's possible that someone would have stepped in and prevented my abuse from continuing and Mons. Boyer would have been prosecuted. Furthermore, he would not have been given the opportunity to abuse more children. I fear that I was not his only victim, not only

based on what what we know about the behaviors of sexual predators, but because, over the years, parishioners from my old neighborhood have told me that a loved one who had spent time with Mons. Boyer as a child showed classic signs of having been victimized. Others have formally brought charges against him.

Part of the insidious nature of sexual abuse of children is that it inflicts shame upon its victims, as well as most other people who are involved. Catholics and other people of faith are often instructed to deal with this kind of shame by confessing to a member of the clergy what they saw, heard, or experienced. When such an admission is expressed to a religious authority as penitential communication, just as when a patient divulges similar information to a therapist, it's a chance for child victims to be heard, perpetrators to be made accountable, and a community to heal. But by not requiring that this information be reported—and, thereby, allowing religious organizations that want to protect their reputations to avoid reporting these suspected cases—we are doing the opposite: victims are kept silent and perpetrators are free to continue to harm those victims and countless others.

We have heard about this same scenario playing out in Catholic and other religious communities throughout the world—religious leaders such as priests who are known to have abused children are sheltered and protected by the church that moves them to other environments where they are free to abuse again. Tragically, the California Assembly has been complicit in allowing this cycle to continue by not requiring clergy to report abuse who obtain information about those crimes during penitential communication.

In 1997, the Assembly did the right thing to include clergy as mandated reporters. As was the case in my family when I was growing up, priests, in their duty to minister to families, got to know family members and observe their dynamics. As such, similar to other mandated reporters, clergy are likely to be made aware that a child is in danger, and so they are in an ideal position to report those cases. But by including

the penitential-communication exemption, the Assembly is greatly weakening that safeguard and permitting child sexual abuse to continue.

At my nonprofit organization, the Child-Friendly Faith Project, we believe that all children deserve to be protected from abuse and neglect and all perpetrators of maltreatment should be held accountable. States like California recognize that need by requiring that certain adults be mandated reporters without a stipulation of how the information is obtained. But by including the so-called “confession loophole” for clergy, the Assembly has essentially been taking the position that only some children deserve our protection, while others—namely those whose abusers are named during confession—do not.

It’s time for the California Assembly to do what it can to better ensure that all child victims of abuse are taken out of harm’s way and all perpetrators are held accountable by removing the penitential-communication exemption.

Sincerely,

*Rev. Dr. Jaime Romo*

Rev. Dr. Jaime Romo  
President, The Child-Friendly Faith Project