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Sister Maureen Paul Turlish, 79 Activist challenged faith leaders over abuse by priests



Sister Maureen Paul Turlish speaks at a news conference in 2015. She was accompanied by Arthur Baselice Jr., who said his son Arthur Baselice III was abused by a priest and a religious brother, became addicted to drugs and committed suicide. (Matt Rourke/AP)

by [Harrison Smith](#)

Sister Maureen Paul Turlish, who risked retaliation from the Catholic Church hierarchy to become a tenacious advocate for victims of sexual abuse by the clergy, died July 18 at a rehabilitation clinic in Cincinnati. She was 79.

The cause was viral encephalitis, said Paul Turlish, her brother and only immediate survivor. She was injured in May in a car accident near her home in New Castle, Del., and moved to Ohio for medical treatment, he said.

Sister Maureen Paul long worked in Wilmington, Del., as an art teacher, not an activist. But in 2002, when a [Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation](#) by the Boston Globe revealed years of sexual abuse in the priesthood and an accompanying coverup by Catholic Church officials, she launched a wide-ranging effort to support victims and bring their abusers to justice.

“At the time, she was the only religious woman that would publicly stand up for this issue,” the Rev. Thomas P. Doyle, a canon lawyer, recently told the National Catholic Reporter’s [Global Sisters Report](#). “She brought courage . . . she was not afraid to write or call [the clergy] on their duplicity.”

Sister Maureen Paul at first used a pseudonym — Sister M. Immaculata Dunn, drawn from her mother’s maiden name — to write searing letters to the Philadelphia Inquirer, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, among other publications.

Published as letters to the editor, they decried a “lack of moral leadership” among Catholic bishops and called for alleged abusers to be brought to trial.

Sister Maureen Paul and Marci Hamilton attend a forum for the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests. (Bradley C Bower/AP)

“We all wondered who she was,” said Robert M. Hoatson, a former priest and an advocate for sexual abuse victims. “She was driving the hierarchy crazy because they wanted to clamp down on her. They were going to write to her religious order, tell her superiors to knock it off.”

Sister Maureen Paul appeared at conferences for the [Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests](#) (SNAP), organized demonstrations outside the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and began publishing articles in her own name in 2005. She said she decided to go public that year after the release of a 418-page grand jury report in Philadelphia, which found that two cardinals concealed the decades-long abuse of hundreds of children by at least 63 priests.

No one was charged, the [report noted](#), because archdiocese officials had successfully buried reports of misconduct and “managed to outlast any statutes of limitations.” Its release marked a turning point for Sister Maureen Paul, who went on to co-found a pair of support groups for survivors, [National Survivor Advocates Coalition](#) and — with a group that included Doyle and Hoatson — [Catholic Whistleblowers](#). She also focused her efforts on reforming the law.

“I didn’t realize, not being a lawyer, that statutes of limitation regarding child abuse were different in every state. They were based on nothing and everything — they were arbitrary and discriminatory,” she said in a [2016 interview](#) with the Pennsylvania House Democratic Caucus.

According to Hoatson, Sister Maureen Paul “played a pivotal role” in the passage of the 2007 Delaware Child Victims Law, which removed the criminal statute of limitations for child sex abuse in that state and opened a two-year “look-back” window for survivors to file civil suits against their abusers.

The bill, she said in [testimony](#) before Delaware’s House Judiciary Committee, “is definitely not anti-Catholic and it is not Catholic bashing” — but aimed instead to give all victims of child sex abuse their day in court. Its passage resulted in more than 140 lawsuits against the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington, which [filed for bankruptcy](#) in 2009 amid settlement talks with alleged victims.

Sister Maureen Paul was less successful with reform efforts in Pennsylvania and New York, where she lobbied legislators but faced opposition from church officials and critics who believed she was singling out the Catholic Church for punishment.

Her faith had not wavered, she said, but her belief in the institutions of the church had been shaken to the core.

“No longer am I the person I used to be even 10 or 12 years ago,” she said in [a 2011 speech](#) at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia. “And although I cannot compare my loss with the loss suffered by victims of childhood sexual abuse, there is nevertheless loss. Something has been taken from me, as it has been taken from every member of the people of God. A part of me has died.”

Maureen Anne Turlish was born in Philadelphia on July 5, 1939. Her mother, the former Mary Immaculata Dunn, was a homemaker; her father, Paul Turlish, was a leader of a local bakery and confectionery union. He took Maureen to her first picket line when she was 9, giving her what she later called an “early education in justice and peace issues.”

Maureen encountered the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur for the first time while in high school, through an art history teacher who became a mentor, and was told by her father that she could join the order only after she turned 21, assuming her interest persisted.

She did so in 1960, after working as a secretary at a children’s hospital, and changed her name to Maureen Paul to honor her father.

At her first profession of vows she added a coda, promising “a special dedication to women and children.”

Sister Maureen Paul graduated in 1965 from Trinity College, a Catholic women’s school now known as Trinity Washington University, and later received a master’s degree in art education from the University of Maryland. As a teacher, she worked at Catholic schools in Baltimore; Philadelphia; Hyattsville, Md.; and Wilmington, where she was chair of the fine arts department at St. Elizabeth High School.

After she went public with her identity, in 2005, she was reprimanded by members of her order, Hoatson said. “She was basically pressured to stop, but she refused. She said, ‘This is part of my vocation now.’”

Sister Maureen Paul served on the board of the Delaware Association for Children of Alcoholics and on committees for [Voice of the Faithful](#), a lay organization that supports survivors of sexual abuse by the clergy. She also [contributed analysis](#) of the sex abuse scandal to the National Catholic Reporter.

“I am a Catholic sister,” she said in one talk in recent years, according to [an obituary](#) published by her order. “I have been involved in the education of children for over 35 years and I love my faith, but I’m still waiting for church leadership to own up and take responsibility for their failures in protecting children.”

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