

Archbishop pressed on his knowledge of crime

by [Lilly Fowler](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue

It was supposed to be a happy day for Archbishop Robert J. Carlson. June 10 marked the fifth anniversary of his installation as Shepherd of Roman Catholics in St. Louis.

But any celebrating on the part of Carlson was done in the midst of nationwide headlines about his connection to the sexual abuse scandal that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church for more than a decade.

Attorney Jeff Anderson released on June 9 a deposition in which Carlson said he was uncertain whether during his time as auxiliary archbishop in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis he knew that a priest engaging in sex with a child constituted a crime.

Over and over, for a total of 193 times throughout the deposition, Carlson said he did not remember in response to questions posed by Anderson.

The deposition, taken in May, is part of a lawsuit in Minnesota involving the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and the Diocese of Winona, Minnesota.

Carlson's statements have angered many, prompting hundreds of comments on social media and news websites.

"You're talking about something that's a clear-cut moral issue," said Mark Mullaney, president of Voice of the Faithful, a group of lay Roman Catholics seeking to reform the church, especially with regard to issues concerning sex.

Judging whether a sex act on a child is criminal requires no legal background, Mullaney said, but "a moral system that you would expect from leaders of the church."

In a statement, Gabe Jones, spokesman for the Archdiocese of St. Louis, said the plaintiff's lawyer had strategically taken "Archbishop Carlson's response to a question out of context and suggested that the archbishop did not know that it was a criminal offense for an adult to molest a child. Nothing could be further from the truth.

“When the archbishop said ‘I’m not sure whether I knew it was a crime or not,’ he was simply referring to the fact that he did not know the year that clergy became mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse.

“The media reports of this deposition have not only called into question the exemplary record Archbishop Carlson has amassed during his more than 40 years of ministry, but has also reopened the wounds of survivors of the heinous act of sexual abuse, and has caused further pain to the Catholic faithful, both here in the Archdiocese of St. Louis and beyond,” Jones said.

Anderson, for his part, speculated in an interview June 10 that Carlson was attempting to get around Minnesota law, which in 1988 made clergy mandatory reporters, meaning that they had a legal obligation to report any suspicion of child sexual abuse to authorities.

Supporters came to Carlson’s defense, arguing that the deposition simply reflects what his lawyer coached him to say. Others, however, said shifting blame to attorneys is a poor excuse.

“It’s a good strategy if you want to avoid admitting the truth,” said Jerome O’Neill, a lawyer in Burlington, Vermont, and an expert on sexual abuse lawsuits. “You may look foolish and stupid, but you aren’t admitting to something that could be troublesome to your employer, or in this instance the diocese that you used to be in,” O’Neill said.

Bill Hannegan, a well-known supporter of Xiu Hui “Joseph” Jiang, a St. Louis priest who recently was indicted in connection with sexual abuse of a child, argued that the questions lobbed at Carlson were too vague.

“If Archbishop Carlson had been clearly asked whether he knew, back in 1984, that it was a crime for a priest, or any adult, to sexually abuse a child, I believe he would have answered yes, as he did when asked about a specific case elsewhere in the deposition,” Hannegan said.

“The actual questions he was asked did not contain the words *child* or *abuse*, and so might have been misconstrued as questions about Minnesota age of consent laws.”

But Mullaney of Voice of the Faithful said the Roman Catholic Church will not move past the sexual abuse scandal as long as leaders refuse to take responsibility.

Victims, he said, are “looking for more than money. They are looking for justice. And these bishops don’t understand that.” —*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*