

Seminarian's Perspective

It is the priesthood of Christ we all share

Recent headlines about the sexual abuse crisis in the Church are so overwhelming that one can't seem to escape them even if one is not a news junkie. As a seminarian for five years and a future priest within one year, this issue is particularly personal to me. I hope that by writing this commentary, you would see how the abuse issue may impact a young man's life as he prepares to enter ministry.

We are proud of our Catholic tradition; if not, we would probably no longer remain Catholics. Sometimes we are so proud of our tradition, and because of pride, we have a defensive tendency whenever the Church is being exposed for its faults. We quickly compare this type of exposure to Christ's persecution. Although this sounds plausible for people of faith, it doesn't make any sense for anyone else. Yes, Christ was persecuted and killed, yet he was innocent. In contrast, the Church made mistakes, or committed crimes, depending on how you look at the abuse issue. Once we stop comparing a crisis in our Church, no matter how grave it is, to the redemptive work of Christ, dialogue and truth will lead to reform.

Reform, without a doubt, is happening faster than what the media is telling us. For example, when I applied to the seminary, I had to take a thorough physical examination by a medical doctor, a psychological evaluation by a psychologist-therapist, two interviews with the archbishop and seminary, as well as receiving recommendations from both clergy and lay people. We

want to make sure our candidates are capable of having a family and that celibacy is a conscious decision, not a default because of physical or psychological defects. We had to pass a training course on sexual abuse and attend workshops dealing with the abuse issue. It's tragic that some in the priesthood committed the most despicable crime and sin involving minors.

We should be vigilant, not hysterical, by training children in our parishes so they can be aware of what is going on. Sometimes, hysteria sets in and the church is accused of focusing too much on the issue, and parents might feel their children are receiving training in an area that should be reserved for parents.

I am aware of many reform-oriented Catholic groups that call for the repeal of mandatory celibacy in the priesthood as one solution to the abuse crisis. Statistically, abuse happens at a higher percentage in the general population, and it doesn't limit itself to unmarried persons. The repeal of celibacy argument is invalid and unsound. The solutions, perhaps, are better formation of seminarians, stricter enforcement of the law, and on-going spiritual training for our priests. Personally, I don't see the Church forcing me to become a celibate before I get ordained, but rather, I believe I can live a healthy and holy celibate life, and the Church invites me to consider a vocation to the priesthood.

As I approach ordination, I don't see a halo glowing above my head, yet I see a dark storm gathering. I pray that this dark storm of the abuse scandal would turn into

a big rain of holy water, to wash away the filth in the church and in my heart. After the rain, the Easter flowers of the priesthood may blossom and give fragrance to a world seeking for meaning and in need of the Resurrection. In the Gospel of Luke, the angels asked the women, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen..." (Lk 24:5). We are a Church of hope and of the Resurrection. We should not look for the meaning of the priesthood among the headlines, but we should look at Christ, because we have "such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, [and] exalted above the heavens" (Heb 7:26). It's the priesthood of Christ we all share, both clergy and laity in our own ways, and it's this priesthood of Christ that inspires me to continue in my formation in the seminary.



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Guest Commentary

Some facts to remember in clergy sexual abuse discussions

There are a lot more myths than facts bantered around about clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Here are six important points you don't hear about in discussions regarding sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

1. Catholic clergy aren't more likely to abuse children than other clergy or men in general.

According to the best available data (which is pretty good mostly coming from a comprehensive report by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 2004 as well as several other studies), 4 percent of Catholic priests in the USA sexually victimized minors during the past half century. No evidence has been published at this time that states that this number is higher than clergy from other religious traditions. The 4 percent figure is lower than school teachers (at 5 percent) during the same time frame and perhaps as much as half of the numbers of the general population of men. Research states that 17 percent of American women and 12 percent of American men were sexually violated when they were children by an adult. Sexual victimization is tragically fairly common in the general population but luckily these numbers have been dropping in recent years.

2. Clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church can't be blamed on celibacy. Not having sex doesn't make children the object of one's desire.

First, if Catholic clergy aren't more likely to be sex offenders than other clergy or men in general, then celibacy can't be blamed by itself. Most sex offenders are not celibate clergy. Most are married or partnered. Furthermore, many men who don't have sex for a variety of reasons (e.g., no suitable partners, marital or relationship distress) don't turn to children for sexual gratification. They turn to other consenting adults. Think about it: If you don't have sex who becomes the object of your desire? Children or other adults?

3. Clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church can't be blamed on homosexuality.

Although the vast majority of victims are boys (80 percent according to the 2004 John Jay study and other studies) and the Catholic Church has a large number of priests who are homosexual in orientation, homosexuality doesn't make men sex offenders. No evidence exists that suggest that sexual orientation, in and of itself, makes someone at risk to commit sex crimes against children or others. Sexual orientation is not a risk factor for crime.

4. Clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church can't be blamed on an all male clergy.

If Catholic clergy aren't more likely to be sex offenders than other clergy from other traditions, then an all male clergy can't be blamed. Having women clergy doesn't stop sex offenders from offending.

5. Almost all of clergy sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church that we hear about in the news are from decades ago (usually the 1960's and 70's).

Although these stories are horrific to hear, they are

almost never about incidents that occurred since the late 1980's. Incidents of abuse in the past 20 to 25 years are quite rare compared to incidents during the 60's and 70's. This is also true for other groups such as school teachers. Incidents since the 2002 crisis in the USA unfolded are especially rare. Most of the more recent cases are from international priests who were both born and formed (i.e., trained and ordained) overseas who generally didn't go through the screening and training process that local men go through. Some argue that more recent victims (i.e., since the mid 1980's) just haven't come forward yet. Perhaps that is true but thus far no published data supports this theory.

6. Most clergy sex offenders aren't pedophiles.

Research tells us that about 80 percent of clergy sex offenders abuse post pubescent teens, not pre pubescent children. So, the phrase "pedophile priest" is a misnomer. You might say that it doesn't matter. Both categories involve victimizing minors. True, but the risk factor profile as well as the evaluation and treatment prognosis is much different between the two groups. Besides, while people may be worried about young children being victimized they may neglect the more likely victim, the teen.

We all may have particular beliefs and perspectives about the causes, contexts, nature, and scope of clergy sexual abuse in the Church but we should be informed by empirical quality data and reason.

Perhaps the real issue here is that many are outraged with Church leaders (especially bishops) whom they believe have been defensive and arrogant. People demand responsibility and accountability and they don't see it happening. Clearly, some Church leaders treated victims and their families very poorly. For many rank-and-file Catholics who often put priests on a pedestal, it is shocking to hear that some of these men have sexually violated anyone, let alone children. The Church's unpopular positions on sexual ethics (e.g., masturbation, contraception, homosexuality, divorce) make sex crimes committed by priests even more scandalous. The secrecy and otherworldliness of the Catholic Church also make the story of child sexual abuse committed by priests of great interest to the media and to the general population.

Finally, many of the 25 percent of Americans who are Catholic have ambivalent feelings about their Church

to begin with even before the clergy abuse crisis unfolded. Many who were raised in the Church during previous generations have deeply emotional stories of priests and nuns who had impossibly high standards for thought and behavior which makes stories of clergy sexually violating children so hypocritical.

Perhaps the Gospel verse "he who is without sin may cast the first stone" from John 8:7 sums up this sentiment.

Let me be very clear. The sexual victimization of children by priests (or by anyone for that matter) is inexcusable. Church officials protecting offenders rather than victims is also inexcusable. There is much to be angry about. Many get even more upset when accountability and responsibility in the Church doesn't seem to occur.

Many reasonable and thoughtful people argue that the Catholic Church should allow married men, women, and those who are homosexual to be ordained as priests and deacons (as the Episcopalians do) to prevent clergy abuse from occurring. But the current data on clergy abuse just doesn't seem to support these arguments. Perhaps future data will change current findings but you have to go with the best available data to inform one's thinking now.

The recent clergy abuse stories coming out of Europe and South America are not surprising but we have to be reasoned, letting good data and logic inform us rather than relying on myths, anger, and hysteria. If someone (or some group) has empirical data that can contradict the six points mentioned above, please present it and let it be subjected to academic peer review. We all may have particular beliefs and perspectives about the causes, contexts, nature, and scope of clergy sexual abuse in the Church but we should be informed by empirical quality data and reason.

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