

Catholic Clergy and the Violation of Children
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The sexual violation of minors and vulnerable adults by the Catholic clergy of all ranks has been a tragic reality in the church from its earliest days. The *Didache*, a kind of handbook for followers of Christ, which dates from the first century, states explicitly that adult men are not to engage in sex with young boys. The prohibition applied to *all* males in the community including the leaders who at that time were not known as clergy.

The earliest known *law* or *canon* to condemn sex between adults and boys dates from the Synod of Elvira which took place in Spain in 309 A.D. Over the centuries church leadership has been well aware of the various violations of mandatory celibacy by the secular or diocesan clergy and of similar violations of the vow of chastity by religious men. There is a body of ecclesiastical legislation that spans the centuries, all of which attempts to either eliminate or control the grave problem of the sexual violation of minors or adults by clergy and religious. Some of this legislation is in the form of papal decrees. There are also canons or decrees from general councils, regional synods and disciplinary edicts issued by individual bishops and major superiors of religious communities.

A common theme over the centuries is the recognition by church leadership that sexual violation of anyone is a serious sin but if the victim is a child it is particularly heinous. In certain historic periods church leadership gave evidence that it was also acutely aware of the criminal dimension of sexual abuse. St. Augustine mentioned in one of his letters that Christian men who committed sodomy, the common term for abuse of a boy, should suffer the same punishment as anyone else under Roman Law. Later on in the late medieval and early modern period there is ample documentary evidence that in certain locales clerics or religious accused of sexual abuse of minors were tried in church courts and if found guilty, defrocked and then turned over to the secular authorities for punishment. In some instances the punishment was death.

The present era of awareness of sexual violation by clergy and religious began in the U.S. in the early 1980s with two separate cases: one from the Archdiocese of Minneapolis St. Paul and the other the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana. Since that time there have been thousands of cases not only in the United States but in Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Within the past two years several victims have exposed systemic abuse and cover-up by the church leaders in several Latin American and African countries.

In spite of the legacy of internal legislation the church's leadership has not been able to eliminate this horrific problem. Over the centuries the church's concern has been focused on the errant clerics: explaining their behavior, controlling or punishing them and in our present era, concealing them. There are two massive lacunae in the historical response and in the

contemporary response as well: an accurate awareness of the profound harm done to the victims *and* an honest recognition of the essential role church leadership has played in enabling the clergy and religious perpetrators by way of cover-up, clandestine re-assignment and sheltering the accused from accountability in the secular community.

The damage done to the many thousands of victims is profound, complex and lasting. One noted psychologist with years of experience treating Catholic clergy perpetrators and their victims has said that sexual molestation of a Catholic child by a Catholic priest is not only different from other forms of such abuse, but much more destructive. *Why?* Because the Catholic child is taught that the Catholic priest (and often by extension the Catholic brother) is an exalted and unique person who takes the place of Christ. This identification of the priest with Christ has been so intimate, *and erroneous* for some victims that they believe the sexual molestation is somehow *a punishment dealt them by God*. This same psychologist used the term *soul murder* to describe sexual abuse by clergy.

The spiritual damage goes far deeper than the anger or fear evoked by the sight of a priest. Many victims expressed that they didn't even know they had a spiritual dimension "*until it was taken away*." (words of a victim). There are several levels of spiritual damage. The first and often immediate effect of abuse is stunned shock that a cleric or religious would even do what he did to the victim. Many are so stunned they describe the reaction as "*emotional paralysis*." The inevitable anger is directed not only at the physical and sexual violation but at the violation of the almost total trust placed in the cleric. The victims often believe that the perpetrator violated their trust but also the church authorities. When a victim discovers that the perpetrator's bishop or religious superior has tried to cover for the perpetrator, has broken promises made to them or has threatened them if they reveal the abuse, the rupture of the trust becomes deeper and the spiritual pain more intense. Most victims (from my experience) have rejected the institutional church with a mixture of anger, disappointment and sadness. The church that was a home to them and the clergy who were always a source of solace, comfort and hope have turned against them when they needed their support more than at any other time in their lives. The continued attitude of the church leaders has turned many victims against the institutional church, all it stands for and all who remain part of it. For many the final level of spiritual damage is almost inevitable – the rejection God or at least the denial of the existence of "*the Catholic God*" as many victims express it.

Many victims express the knowing emptiness in their being. It is an emptiness they search to fill *with something*. Many flounder, experiencing depression they cannot explain or resolve. Some become militant in their anger towards the church and thus still controlled in a very toxic way by the source of their abuse. Others in time find something to fill the spiritual void. Not all but many have expressed a deep sadness at the loss of the source of their Catholic spirituality, believing, often rightly, that it can never be replaced.

The rejection and duplicity of the church leaders, is for many, even more abusive and painful than the physical violation itself. So many are stunned by the destructive way they are treated by church leaders to whom they disclose their abuse.

It became apparent when the present era of revelations of abuse started in the mid- eighties that the church's leadership, diocesan and religious alike, either would not or could not respond with compassionate pastoral support. Initially the victims wanted very little: to be acknowledged and to be believed since so many had hidden their abuse due to shame, guilt or the perception that they would not be believed. Their single most important demand was that the cleric or religious who abused them be dealt with in such a way that he would not be able to harm others. Their primary concern has *never* been money.

In the early years of the present era of the scandal the victims approached the civil courts in reaction to the way so many have been treated by bishops and other religious leaders. For many their civil attorneys provided them the understanding, sympathy and support they *should* have received from the bishops but tragically did not.

As one victim said, "*they [bishops and religious superiors] outsourced the gospel to their lawyers.*" This statement is tragic but true. Perhaps the single most mystifying aspect of the entire scandal has been the inability or unwillingness of the church's leadership to comprehend the profound damage *and* to respond with unqualified compassion. The pattern of the church leadership's response, on all levels and in every country, has been to prioritize the image and power of the institution over the welfare, especially the *spiritual* welfare, of the victims. It is as if the chilling verse in Luke 17:2 did not exist.

Although popes, bishops and other religious leaders have issued countless pronouncements expressing their regrets and their sorrow for the harm done to victims, the actions of far too many have contradicted their words. They simply cannot publicly (or privately) state that they regret what has happened and pray for the healing of victims while at the same time they pay attorneys to wage war against them whenever they challenge them and demand accountability and transparency. The treatment meted out to victims by church-paid attorneys or by the attorneys representing their insurance carriers is all too often brutal, demeaning, dehumanizing and above all re-victimizing. They rightly feel they are being punished because they stood up to the institutional church or refused to accept the patronizing response to their disclosure of abuse.

In general Catholic clergy do not fully understand the nature of the damage done by sexual violation. Their understanding of sexual violation has traditionally been in terms of sin, moral fault and weak will. The proliferation of cases of abuse by clergy has brought a more profound knowledge of the psychological/pathological dimension and the criminal dimension as well.

People in general but especially clergy understand little about the multi-level impact of sexual violation on the victim. When confronted about why he had permitted a prolific abuser to remain in ministry as long as he did, his bishop said "*little boys heal.*" Little boys and little girls do *not* readily heal, nor do adult men or women who have experienced such violation. The scars are deep and continue to inflict emotional and spiritual pain on the victim throughout life. Those who derisively refer to adults who have come forward with reports of "*old cases*" often exclaiming "*but that happened years ago. It's in the past*" betray a woeful ignorance of the true violence of sexual abuse. The professional studies show that the average age of a person who is sexually abused is twelve and the average time that elapses before they are *able* to publicly disclose is *thirty years*. It is common to accuse adult victims of coming forward only to "*get the money.*" Such crude and heartless accusations are not only baseless but are reflective of an attitude that is sharply antithetical to the spirit of Christ.

Far too many in church leadership think that a proliferation of programs and policies, audits or liturgical services are the answer and that the sharp reduction of contemporary reports means the "*problem*" is behind us. This is mistaken to say the least but worse, it is revelatory of the still existing fatal flaw in the institutional church. As long as there are men and women who are in pain because of the sexual abuse perpetrated on them or worse, because of the spiritual abuse they endured, the church's worst nightmare will go on.

The sexual abuse "*crisis*" that continues in our church and in our society has revealed a dark and toxic fault that runs to the very foundation of the institutional church. The inability of so many in the church — hierarchy, priests and lay people — to comprehend that in the adversarial way victims of the church's own dysfunction are treated is the evidence that the elitist clerical culture is the locus of the fault. If this culture has such high value that victims are sacrificed for its stability and image, then it is truly a toxic virus in the Body of Christ.

Men and women inside and outside the church have been searching for the reasons for the "*crisis*" since it reared its head thirty years ago. We have blamed celibacy, materialism, the sixties pop culture, sexual freedom, the media, the lawyers and even the victims themselves. Perhaps the hypocritical way victims have been treated is rooted not in something without but something within — a false ecclesiology that sustains a stratified church with the clerical caste dominating the laity. Perhaps there is more truth than irony in the biting title of Jimmy Breslin's book from over a decade ago, *The Church that Forgot Christ*.