

## SEXUAL LIFE AS TOLD BY SEMINARIANS

### Can Seminary Formation Prevent Clergy Sexual Abuse?

**FX. Eko Armada Riyanto, CM<sup>♦</sup>**

*Widya Sasana School of Philosophy and Theology, Malang, Indonesia*

#### **Abstract**

This article is based on my research of the sexual life as told by seminarians. The aim of research is to find out more precisely opinions and stories of their sexual experience. My assumption is that the crisis of the Catholic Church with regard to sexual abuse committed by the clergy has to be taken seriously since the beginning of the life-processing of the sexual life of the seminarians in the initial formation. The methodology of the research is an open questionnaire with phenomenological approach which gives more space to the subjects to share personal stories. From a hundred respondents, ninety-eight of them wrote down their experiences in a closed letter. The result is that many of them have “uncomfortable experiences” of sexuality or even suffer sort of sexual violence connected with the family background and friends. Some serious traumatic experiences could cause them to be a “wounded person” from the standpoint of sexuality. They need really a proper assistance in formation program.

**Keywords:** Seminarians; Sexual Abuse; Formation for Sexual Maturity; Sexuality; Seminary Formation

“Never again will Church ignore sex abuse victims! Before God and his people I express my sorrow for the sins and grave crimes of

---

♦FX. Eko Armada Riyanto, CM is a Vincentian priest, formator of Saint Vincent de Paul Seminary and professor of philosophy. He holds a doctorate in philosophy from the Gregorian University, Rome (1999) with specialization of social ethics. He has been a formator since 1993, and is currently president of the Widya Sasana School of Philosophy and Theology, Malang, Indonesia. Email: fxarmadacm@gmail.com

clerical sexual abuse committed against you. And I humbly ask forgiveness” (Pope Francis).<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the crisis in the Catholic Church, especially with regard to sexual abuses of the clergy,<sup>2</sup> I want to put forward a different point of view in approaching the problem. I wish to share my research on sexual life as told by seminarians (name, place, time remain confidential<sup>3</sup>). If I may compare formation with cultivation, what I would like to do is to offer a more careful understanding of what kind of “seeds” that we have in the field of formation. Evil often does not occur just in a day. We need to look into more precisely the “seeds” and to delve into their stories of sexual life. By so doing, formators in seminary hopefully get necessary materials to renew formation program of sexuality that fits to the “seeds” since the very beginning. I believe that the divine call could grow up more effectively and excellently within these promising seeds with proper program of accompaniment in their formation.

### Collecting Stories

The subjects (respondents) are the candidates for priesthood from different religious congregations and dioceses of Indonesia. They undergo formation in their seminaries and study theology and

---

<sup>1</sup>Pope Francis said this on Monday, July 7, 2014, and used his first meeting with victims of clerical sexual abuse to offer his strongest condemnation of a crisis, while begging forgiveness from victims and pledging to crack down on bishops who fail to protect children. See [https://www.delcotimes.com/news/pope-to-sex-abuse-victims-i-beg-your-forgiveness/article\\_8c551b4a-b480-5338-8ea9-a164173164bb.html](https://www.delcotimes.com/news/pope-to-sex-abuse-victims-i-beg-your-forgiveness/article_8c551b4a-b480-5338-8ea9-a164173164bb.html) (Accessed, May 15, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>There are big efforts from the KWI (Bishops’ Conference of Indonesian) to tackle the problem of sexual abuse of the clergy. Seminars and publications related to sexuality have been prepared. Some of them are publications of “*Pelayanan Profesional Gereja Katolik dan Penyalahgunaan Wewenang Jabatan*” (*Professional Ministries of the Catholic Church and Prevention of the Abuse of Power*) in two volumes (Indonesian Language and English) published by Kanisius, Yogyakarta and the Commission of Seminary of the KWI. The topics dealt with in the books consist of guidelines for protection of the children, maintaining ministerial boundaries, safe touch in ministry, counter transference in ministry, sexuality, confidentiality, etc. The publication is intended for the members of the Association of Religious Congregations in Indonesia. Cf. *Professional Ministries of the Catholic Church and Prevention of the Abuse of Power*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Research method is qualitative. Due to the personal, candid, and confidential sharing of the topics, in this presentation the names, place, time are to be kept confidential. All of respondents have agreed that their sharing can be utilized for improving the formation programme.

philosophy in a Higher Institute of Philosophy and Theology. In terms of age they are all between twenty and thirty years. They are in the undergraduate and master program of philosophy and theology (a year before ordination to diaconate). They come from different regions (provinces) of Indonesia. They originate mostly from villages or remote places throughout the Archipelago; only some are from cities. Regarding their family background, they are generally from the middle class, modest or even poor families. These seminarians are those who wrote down stories of their sexual life and experience.

The questions were about opinions, feelings, personal stories, and suggestions based on the concrete experiences of sexual life. Here is my questionnaire: A). On "Why" of sexual maturity of formation: What do I feel (how do I manage my feeling) when hearing sexual abuses committed by the clergy? Do I have experience of "failure" in terms of sexual relationship? B). On "What" of sexual maturity: stories of my experience of falling in love; do I have a tendency of being a homosexual (though it has not been realized yet); experience of doing masturbation; watching pornography; can I describe my "feeling" before and after having seen porn; when was my first time of watching porn? Regarding my family background: what do I remember as my happy or unhappy experiences that may affect my sexual maturity. C). On "How" of sexual maturity: Do I feel free (am I open) when sharing about my sexual experience with my spiritual director?

### **Sexual Maturity**

When seminarians are requested to give opinion of the importance of sexual maturity in the priestly formation, most of them are capable of drawing wonderful thoughts. These thoughts seem to depict idealism of what they mean by sexual integrity. Apart from beautiful language they commonly used, there is somehow a realistic understanding of sexual problems as well. By realistic understanding I mean looking at how important is an adequate sexual formation in seminary. Our seminarians also acknowledge their immense efforts to be able to achieve their sexual maturity. To them sexual formation is also like a journey of climbing a mountain where they have often had experiences of falling down in its cliffs. Here is an expression of a seminarian regarding sexual maturity.

“Sexuality is both strength and energy of vocational life. For me without sexual maturity, a priest is in great danger; he will not grow up in spirituality and pastoral service; and the bad impacts of his sexual immaturity will surely be very painful to the people whom he serves” (H19).<sup>4</sup>

As a person who steps in the process to achieve human maturity, seminarian believes that sexual maturity is a matter of how *I myself* can control compulsive sexual desire. Technological progress of the internet is very challenging to everyone. There is real and urgent need of the seminarians to be responded. One of the daily and serious issues to deal with is addiction to porn movies. A program like listening to a couple’s sharing of concrete dynamism of sexual relationship in family life is also strongly suggested. A mature seminarian from the so-called “late vocation”<sup>5</sup> observing his young fellows, sincerely says:

Hope what I shared contributes something important for formators to determine revisions of formation program of sexuality in seminary... From my daily observation I discover that those candidates for priesthood who have undergone formation since the minor seminary are commonly more obsessed and addicted to porn films. I don’t know why they are so. When I asked them why they are so addicted to porn films, they easily answered, it is important to learn about sex so that we can reply people’s question of the sort of problems. Well, I think they are only justifying what they do. I think sexual maturity should not definitely be expressed like watching porn films all the time. On the contrary, it must be practiced in being abstinent of doing such thing and in controlling our sexual desire... The need of good formation in terms of sexual life is indeed urgent. It would be good that formators invite a couple to share about sexual life, dynamism of sexual relationship and its values they live out” (C49).

### **When Hearing about Sexual Scandals**

What is your feeling when you hear about sexual scandals committed by clergy? To seminarians I asked about their feelings. As we know, feeling is not something to be put aside in formation. It is a

---

<sup>4</sup>The letter followed by the number (for example H19 as here) is an identification of the replies of the questionnaire. “H” refers to question concerning topic of sexual maturity in formation; “C” refers to questions on sexual scandals; and “D” to question of experience of falling in love, etc. The number, for example “19” here, is the number of the seminarian who replied.

<sup>5</sup>The “late vocation” means those seminarians (candidates for priesthood and lay brothers) who do not enter the minor seminary before the major seminary formation. Their preparation is undergone in postulancy before novitiate. They are usually mature individuals in terms of age (more than 30 years of old).

sort of spontaneous reception of a person's heart. Basically, seminarians feel sad, disappointed, devastated, angry, *but* many of them seek to look more deeply into the real problems. Some of them even become afraid of their future that similar difficulties of sexual life might happen to them as well. This is what I mean by listening to the "feeling" of seminarians in connection with sexual scandals: they would consider that such sexual scandals are not just others' but could also be theirs someday.

My parish priest was transferred immediately after having a sexual scandal. It was painful to me, as I remember he was a good priest. At least I experienced that he looked to be the graceful and generous one. After that, my father told me, 'you must be careful and watchful. Do not make a 'stupid play' with the holy sacrament of priesthood. Your life will be definitely miserable.' My father's words still remain in my heart. When I notice friends of mine who left their vocational life caused by their difficulties in sexual life, I am wondering and questioning myself whether I would be strong enough to cope with problems of my own sexuality (C30).

Sexual scandals of the clergy is only one of the misconducts due to the lack of an integral formation in the seminary. So, as a seminarian contends, we need to be watchful not only to sexual problems but also to human maturity. Sexual scandal is not like a performance of bad play in theatre in which we are only spectators. As if it also involved seminarians in a way that they could fall in crisis of vocational life.

"Sexual abuse, pedophilia, and other scandals... those things make me upset, disappointed, angry, and frustrated. Hearing about all such things I almost want to quit from religious life. All of scandals in the Church put my spirit of vocational life down in deep personal crisis as well" (H31).

Being fearful and confused typically belongs to the feelings of seminarians. The following is 'whisper' of a seminarian who felt confused regarding his being attached to a girl with whom he fell in love with. He even violated the rule of the formation house and felt stupid and silly of what he did in the past.

My feeling is dominated by fear when hearing sexual scandals of priests! I am looking at myself who is also weak or even very weak in dealing with my own sexuality. I am afraid of becoming another one who could fall freely in the same scandal... It just happened to me. It was already midnight. I went out from seminary to meet a girl with whom I was in love. It was 12 o'clock in the night! I knew at that time everybody was sleeping, so there was nobody who knew that I violated the rule of my

community. When I knocked at her house, I did find her with joy. She awkwardly looked happy too. But, what jolted me surprisingly was that she told me frankly I should be a good candidate for priesthood. She refused to do any sinful thing with me. So, I returned to seminary thinking that I was indeed silly. I was aware that I could have had love with her. She was so firm and decisive that I should be a good religious. How stupid I was! (C46).

### **Sexual Immaturity**

Seminarians have usually told love stories in beautiful manner. They remember their experiences of falling in love with girls as something to be proud of. Some of them told stories of their stupid behaviours toward girlfriends and parents. The thing is that it is indeed important to pay attention to how they describe sexual immaturity. By sexual immaturity they mean improper behaviour to get sexual pleasure by surfing adult contents in the internet and doing masturbation. From this research many seminarians told that they do have experience of masturbation. Some seminarians are used to have it continuously all the time. They prefer to use the term of "being addicted to sexual pleasure in masturbation." However, they also indicate feelings before and after masturbating. Some seminarians do feel guilty and sinful, some do not. Another problem is that a couple of seminarians who used to masturbate do something dangerous in terms of sexual maturity such as looking for sexual compensation to have sexual intercourse with any girl. Why do they masturbate? They do so when they feel lonely after having some troubles with their daily duties.

I feel regretful and stupid as I have starved of doing masturbation again and again because of my wild fantasies. This fantasy is a result of reading pornography or watching porn films that I can easily download from the internet. Why have I done this stupid thing? As far as I am aware of my sinful masturbation, I have watched porn film and starved for sexual pleasure because I feel lonely. I escape from my daily burdens. Besides all of my weaknesses, I do realize that I do not have a true love and support from community, formators, and even my spiritual director. My imagination drags me to the memory of being together with my ex-girlfriend. This is what I understand as my failure in pursuing sexual maturity (D15).

Sexual desire is compulsive. Watching porn movies is a sort of unhealthy habit that can easily bring seminarians to trouble in experiencing sexual immaturity. Many seminarians (or, almost all of them) have been watching porn movies. Nearly none of them is immune to bad impacts of internet regardless of the fact that their

home is far away, in the very remote places in Flores, Kalimantan, or Sumatra. Many of them started to watch porn in senior or junior high school, but also some in elementary school! Only one seminarian told that he watched porn when he came to novitiate formation. With this data we formators should know that porn movies have already been daily for our seminarians!

“My first experience of watching porn is when I was in the junior high school (after elementary). Since then I have been used to enjoy porn. Well, when watching such films at first I felt my heart beating so fast, but I feel now like almost vomiting” (F10).

This is a signal of bad habit of seminarians: they keep porn films in sticks (flush discs). Some even describe in detail how they watch porn together with other fellows. This is indeed a concern for formators.

I am still keeping porn films in my flush disc. Many kinds of porn films are kept well in my stick. I know this is the very reason why I fail again and again to control my compulsive sexual desire and I am in... ceaseless masturbation. I don't know why I cannot stop this disgraceful habit in my life, though I know it brings me only suffering amid pleasure. I am trying... (H27).

## **Homosexual**

Of one hundred seminarians there are about four or five persons who have embarrassing stories of having homosexual tendency. In the Indonesian context, talking about being homosexual is still taboo. The majority of seminarians consider that being homosexual is not normal at all. But, there are four or five of them who are in this condition; or one of them can probably be considered a bisexual. A person who got unpleasant experience such as being molested or abused by others is commonly tempted to be a homosexual, as told by a couple of seminarians. When his presence is not appreciated by others, that seminarian is also in trouble with his sexual tendency. One of them even wants to commit suicide! There are two seminarians who indicated that sexual abuse by a homosexual formator is very painful experience. For this reason one of them has decided to be an atheist!

My background is typically my own. When I was only in the elementary school as a child I got to learn to fall in love with other girls. Once I experienced love when I was in junior high school (after elementary), a beautiful one refused my expression of love. I felt as if I was totally rejected. I grew up with boys who were my friends. Yet, I remembered I had only a few. At the same time when I was in the last year of junior high school my father was so angry with me simply because I walked

together with girls. These two things happened to me almost in the same time: 1) I felt my love was rejected by a girl with whom I fell in love regardless of being still a child; 2) My parent prohibited me from mingling with girls. So, I closed the door of my heart to girls. Then, when I entered into the minor seminary, I was impressed with a friend (boy) who studied a year ahead of me. He was as caring and decisive as my father. I felt something strange within my heart when I met him. I do not know really why I felt in love with him. I am using an expression "falling in love" just like the feeling that I had when I was in junior high school. A psychologist who worked in seminary told me many things. His first advice was 'you should keep it in secret,' otherwise you would be expelled from seminary! I did keep it a secret until something sinful and embarrassing occurred to me. I did kiss him and even did oral sex with him. At last I did discover myself as a homosexual boy; oh, homosexual creature I am! As homosexual I know I cannot be accepted in religious life as well as in society. At that time I almost committed suicide, not just wanted to leave my priestly vocation. It was six years ago. But unfortunately, as I am now still undergoing formation in the major seminary, formators have not been really helpful to free me from this sinful burden. At the same time, I am fearful of telling such thing to my spiritual director. I do fear that such a kind of experience can be a reason for him to command me to leave the seminary. But, I also realize that when I become a priest, I don't know what I should do if someone would use such a sinful experience of my being homosexual during senior high school as a weapon to "kill" me. Such a memory is indeed a big burden to me... But, this is the second episode of my sexual life. When I was in the second year of major seminary I fell in love with a beautiful girl. She was a student. We communicated intensely with one another through Facebook, telephone, as well as chatting. She was graceful and open. She could share with me everything even about her menstruation. But, again I discover gradually that I did not love her really. I just used her to get a new sensation of an adventure of being in love with a girl, while being a religious at the same time. I blame myself badly... Well in the meantime I have enjoyed again and again masturbation after watching porn on the internet. I even love watching such things. And, what a surprise! I find all the members of my community love pornography (C 30).

For him, discovering himself as homosexual is painful experience. Yet, another context may make him think that he is a bisexual, which can put him in a more painful and complicated situation. He seems to be enslaved and tortured by his compulsive sexual desire that moves him to uncertain directions. What kind of help can the formators in seminary properly offer to such kind of difficulties? This is something serious that proper formation program needs to address.

When I am asked whether I have been interested in the same sex, to be honest, I felt so once. I can tell that for some time I saw a confrere as the one with whom I fell in love. And, I did find that such kind of feeling is

indeed disgusting. It is insane and even odd to me. I don't know why I love my confrere. When I was a child, my penis was squeezed by an unknown adult person. It was so painful. I am wondering myself whether it was the reason why I got strange feelings with my confrere rather than with a girl. Well, I don't have courage to tell the whole of my sexual life as if to my spiritual director. The problem of my sexuality is kept solely in my own secret. I have never shared it to anyone, except to you, Father [Fr Armada CM], but it is also because you don't know who I am.<sup>6</sup> I do appreciate your good intention to ask me about this, hoping that my formators could make some changes in the formation program with regard to sexuality (C18).

### **Family Background**

A seminarian told that as a child he was once beaten up until becoming unconscious by his father after being discovered that he was dating a girlfriend. Such is generally the family background in villages in Indonesia. Speaking about sexual relationship is often regarded a taboo in the traditional Indonesian families. Families in Indonesia still ignore what is going on in the daily life of their beloved young ones. In this context the candidates for priesthood are vulnerable in terms of sexual life and experience.

My uncomfortable experience of sexual life happened when I was still a teenager in the Junior High School. It was dark in the evening. My father dragged me from a street and punched me so sharply that I felt immediately unconscious. I was with my girlfriend walking together to enjoy the evening scenery. I did nothing. The uncomfortable rigidity of sexuality in my family formed me to be a person lacking in self-confidence in sexual maturity (C6).

### **Openness to Spiritual Director**

A new finding that really struck me in this research is this. Among 100 students being asked about their openness to spiritual director, more than 90% responded that they cannot tell their Spiritual Director honestly and openly about their sexual problems. This is indeed a very shocking data that put me in the question mark whether human formation in seminary is truly well set up. What I mean is this: Is there any consideration to reshape a new direction of strategy applied in human formation in our seminaries? Seminarians are facing their turbulent upheavals in their sexual experience caused by in-and-outside of themselves. And, yet they feel alone or even "lonely" in dealing with their serious problems. What I discover is

---

<sup>6</sup>As in other cases, his sharing is given to me in a closed envelope without mentioning name.

that they are not open in spiritual direction because of fear, feeling of being embarrassed, guilty, sinfulness, and the like. There is somehow a wall that separates the language of seminarians and that of formators. Some seminarians even told about misconduct of the formator who is homosexual. Some others acknowledged rigid approach of the formators when talking about sexuality. Many seminarians said about being uncomfortable to talk their sexual experience with a formator on whom their future of vocational life is dependent.

I think it is clear that sexual maturity should be taken in a very serious program of formation. It is to be started from the very beginning of formation. I can have sincere communication with my spiritual director, but I have to realize that I am not open enough to him with regard to my sexual life. There has always been fear, feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable when speaking of sexual experiences. What I am doing is to tell my sexual stories to friends, of course in certain language and expression that they can understand (C3).

Some seminarians consider that sinful experience in sexual life is to be well kept in secret, especially when it is in connection with homosexual experiences. This could be due to the fact that formators are not at ease to deal with homosexuality in formation.

Before entering religious life I was a young man with an uncomfortable experience of sexual life. That experience is, I do acknowledge, my wound. It is also sinful. Such a sinful sexual experience has been kept well in my mind. I have never said this sexual experience in my confession or to a spiritual director. I think, let God, and only Him know my sexual experience; and I do beg Him to pardon my sins. I am thankful to this questionnaire, as I regard that this is my chance to tell my wounded experience in sexuality (H31). When I tried to be open to my spiritual director regarding my sexual life [homosexual tendency], I was surprised with his advice that I should rethink my religious vocation (C46).

Sexual abuse is a tragedy not only in Europe or in the United States or other parts of the world, it is also here, in our home. Some knew that they are victims of sexual abuse and they are afraid of speaking it out; this situation is indeed very worrying. This is an evil that can destroy the seminary very foundations of formation. The Formees are not appreciated as human being. This selfish and abusive system of formation should be rebuilt in such a way that formation is indeed where a seed can grow up gracefully!

I am about to tell the story why we seminarians cannot be open to spiritual directors. My story is all about what happened in my community. This story is not my own. I knew it from two friends of mine who have just left our community. They were victims of sexual abuse

committed by a formator of our community. This is disgusting, but is real. They never told me in detail what was going on. But, one becomes a lay, and the other decided to be an atheist. It seems to me that their problem looks very serious... Until right now I have not been able to open myself to a spiritual director. Fr Armada's letter of questionnaire opens my mind to tell my real stories of sexual experience. I consider that letter as a 'friend' with whom I can share everything regarding sexual life that disturbs me (H31).

### Concluding Remarks

*We have "wounded candidates for priesthood":* Our seminarians [in Indonesia] come from everywhere. Though they are from remote places in Borneo, for instance, they have already had some experiences of sexual problems. Some of them are addicted to watching porn movies; some cannot help but indulge in masturbation continuously; some even had sexual intercourse in the past life; some feel unworthy simply because of their unexpected homosexual tendency; some are still in burden of their past dark life of sort of sexual abuses; some are in difficulties of having self-confidence in dealing with healthy intimacy and friendship with their fellow seminarians and girls surrounding.

*Openness in spiritual direction is a struggle:* More than 90% of our seminarians are not really open to the spiritual director when dealing with the sexual life. What shall the formators do? One of the things to consider is to create an atmosphere of human relationship as well as language of friendly communication in seminary. The difficulty is that in the context of our societies, it is still uncomfortable to talk about sex. Formation program needs to provide more space to deal with this discomfort of talking about sexual experience.

*Art of redirecting sexual desire:* A normal signal of being healthy is that we have sexual desire. To our young seminarians, sexual desire has been so compulsive that they cannot help but feel starved and indulge themselves in masturbation and other sexual activities. Perhaps we need to seek help from experts to learn the art of redirecting sexual desire. This art is to be spelt out and practiced by the seminarians.

*Intimacy, friendship, joyful life in the formation program:* Our seminarians desire for and are in need of having true friendship, healthy intimacy, as well as joyful life during their formation. In sharing their stories of friendship they are so creative and enthusiastic. Yet they have sometimes missed a sense of being realistic. One of them told frankly that, when "I saw a man and girl walking together (in the streets) or them having sexual relationship

(on the internet), I imagined how happy they are and how beautiful is their sexual life; but then I began to think and rethink ... and after some time I enjoyed masturbation to gain such a pleasure of having sex with a girl." Such a kind of imagination brings them in sinful deeds; and after this fleeting sexual pleasure, our seminarians just felt regretful, distressed, unworthy, and lonely, yet they still do the same thing again and again.

*Can we prevent sexual abuses through formation program?* Indeed, it is urgent to renew the formation program taking into account the challenges that the seminarians experience in their sexual life. Hopefully by so doing we may prevent the aggravating sexual abuse by the clergy in the Catholic Church. From this research I do understand the seriousness of dealing with sexual formation in our seminaries, which may not be considered so effective now. In our seminaries in Indonesia (perhaps also in other countries) we have often just expelled several seminarians simply because they did something embarrassing with regard to sexual life. Some are in serious violations of the rule of human integrity; but some of them could be regarded as those with "wounded experience" of the past in sexual life. Sexual abuses of the clergy bring pain and sorrow. Perhaps we, formators in seminary, should be humble to listen to the stories of our seminarians in such a way that we have to deal with their problems in sexual life in a more vigorous and serious way in formation program.