

Formative Perspectives on the Sexual Abuse Crises in the Catholic Church

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Abstract

Morality can be understood as ethical behavior- philosophical, professional, Christian and more specifically, Catholic. There are many crises present in the Catholic Church worldwide and sexual abuse is one of them. Catholic morality determines a practicing Catholics decision making regarding more than just faith issues. The predominant crises for clergy in India appear to be workaholism leading to spiritual dryness, financial mismanagement, and misconduct. The issue of sexual abuse by clergy is real, relevant and complex and this phenomenon in the priesthood, and in society at large, is a complex issue that does not admit of simple understandings or simple solutions. This seems to have arisen because of the blurring of lines between what is right and what is wrong. Sexual abuse by individual priests is often varied, and the victims include both genders. This article treats the issue through the social sciences research available and the various Church documents that address this issue directly or indirectly.

Keywords: Crises, Sexual Abuse, Priests.

Formative Perspectives on the Sexual Abuse Crises in the Catholic Church

Morality can be defined in various ways. It can be understood as ethical behavior - philosophical, professional, Christian and more specifically, Catholic. Morality is not necessarily only a theological or a faith-based

term, but it certainly governs decision making for faith-based persons, depending on the faith or denomination of the person. Catholic morality determines a practicing Catholics decision making regarding more than just faith issues. This article addresses the issue of sexual abuse from a Catholic lens, looking at the literature available in the field of the social sciences, credible popular literature, and a few Church documents.

Among the many crises present today in the Catholic Church worldwide are the sexual abuse of minors by clergy; the cover-up of abuse; the harms perpetrated by a clericalist culture; investigations into homosexuality in seminaries; direct criticism of the pope and ideological divisions among clerics. The predominant crises in India today would be workaholicism leading to spiritual dryness, financial mismanagement, and sexual misconduct. A couple of reasons why these crises have reared their heads in India, as around the world, could be because a priest believes he is uniquely able to discern God's will and judge other people's behavior; he believes that he is spiritually above others, and he believes that he deserves special recognition. This is because a certain amount of narcissism is present in Catholic priests.

The issue of abuses by clergy is real, relevant and complex. The phenomenon of child sexual abuse in the priesthood, and in society at large, is a complex issue that does not admit of simple understandings or simple solutions. The issue needs to be examined in greater depth; otherwise, the church and society will not only repeat past mistakes but also make new mistakes in its responses. What is needed is a more informed understanding and a more reasoned response (Rossetti, 2002). Making a choice for misconduct involves a dissociative cognitive process that leads to a decision being made in opposition to what is right according to moral and religious tenets. This blurring of lines in the context of faith raises many questions for clergy and religious, and if unanswered and not countered can lead to inappropriate actions.

Sexual abuse by individual priests is often varied, and the victims include both genders (Hansen, 2015). No single cause of sexual abuse of minors by clergy has been identified as stated in the John Jay report (2004). A combination of causes predisposes clergy to abuse. Many organizational, psychological, and situational factors contribute to the susceptibility of individual priests to perpetrate abuse. Therefore, awareness building and education are essential for prevention. The article now focuses on the sexual abuse crises in the church, with special reference to child sexual abuse and of vulnerable adults. This issue will be addressed under three headings – crises, challenges, and responses.

Crises

Clergy and religious who offended can be examined through understandings of their personality characteristics, the reasons why they persisted in abusing, and theological misunderstandings. These three points, therefore, lead towards an examination of issues in formation, as well as ongoing formation.

Personality Characteristics. In the process of selection of candidates, it is important to understand the candidates' personality. Personality characteristics serve as indicators for problems that might occur later. Priest-abusers are likely to have experienced some of the following: Poor relationships with "their parents when they were youths" (Wong and Rossetti, 2004, p.14), a history of sexual abuse, isolation, loneliness, insecurity, poor social skills, lack of identity; confusion over sexual identity, psychosexual immaturity, and substance abuse (Stappenbeck, George, Staples, Nguyen, Davis, Kaysen, Heiman, Masters, Norris, Danube, Gilmore, & Kajumulo, 2016). The transition from seminary to parish life may induce high levels of stress in some priests that can lead to higher levels of susceptibility to abuse. They may serve as stressors or triggers (Terry & Ackerman, 2008). Stressors in the lives of the clergy may lead to reactive behaviors to relieve stress, such as high levels of alcohol use, which could in turn act to decrease inhibitions that allow abuse to occur. During the peak years of abuse, the use of alcohol and drugs by abusive priests increased significantly.

Psychological Tests. The John Jay report (2004) states that priests who had abused minors cannot be differentiated significantly on psychological tests, from priests who had not abused minors. Nonetheless, there were several personality-based risk markers on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) that merit attention. In clergy abusers, the MMPI primary scales show elevations on the subscales of denial of social anxiety, authority problems, persecutory ideas, amorality, and over-controlled hostility. Risk markers include, need for affection, social imperturbability, imperturbability, and inhibition of aggression but these elevations are to be interpreted with caution.

The John Jay report (2004) also maintains that clergy offenders display shyness, loneliness, and passivity. Offending clergy exhibited the presence of over-controlled hostility more than non-offending clergy. One specific clergy study found that offenders came from backgrounds characterized by rigidity and dysfunction, with themes of abuse (Post, Altshuler, Kupka, McElroy, Frye, Rowe, Leverich, Grunze, Suppes, Keck, & Nolen, 2015). They had little insight into these areas and had

insufficient training in the issue of transference/countertransference, had virtually no training or education concerning sexual abuse, domestic violence, addictive disease, or healthy professional boundaries, and failed to appreciate how their history of trauma affected their professional life. Many clergy offenders who were studied psychologically showed some personality-based markers on the MMPI. It is to be noted that homosexual orientation is not a significant predictor of sexual abuse of minors (Wong & Rossetti, 2004).

Persistence of Abuse. According to the John Jay report (2004), abuse persisted because the accused priests claim that they were compelled by sick or sinful impulses, was controlled by forces beyond their control and so denied full responsibility for their behavior. They often denied the victim his or her status by claiming that the victim participated by being seductive or precocious or did not fight back or say anything during the abuse. They even blamed the victim or the victim's family for setting up conditions that allowed the abuse to occur by inviting him into their home, engaging him socially, and including him as part of the family. They often downplayed the crime and explicitly blamed victims by placing the onus of the initiation of the physical intimacy on the accuser, referring to the abuse as a relationship. They said that the victims were willing or precocious and considered themselves the victims because they were accused of these indecent acts. They viewed the sexual behavior as consensual, not harmful, and that any behavior short of intercourse as not wrong because it is not sex. They also insinuated that a single incident of sexual behavior was not harmful and that only repetitive acts caused harm. Some even said that the harm should be forgotten because of the time between the incident(s) and the accusation. They tended to explain their transgressions theologically.

Theological Misunderstanding. Priest-abusers explained their identity in relation to acts of abuse by using the image of sinner-self (Terry, 2011). Their understanding of their sinfulness and the possibility of forgiveness in confession meant that after the Sacrament of Reconciliation, their relationship with God was restored, without reference to victims. It is only many years after the acts of abuse took place that they came to understand the impact of their behavior on victims. There was a cognitive dissonance, that arose from the disconnect between the abusers' perception of norms of behavior, potential harms, and motivations for their own behavior, and the reality and the impact of their behavior. Adapting by justifying or excusing behavior allowed the abusive behavior to persist. They believed that seeking forgiveness from parishioners and

victims and having completed some distinct punishment or treatment was enough to end the process of condemnation (Bange, 2004).

Some priest-abusers stopped because of internal reasons, feeling guilty about their behavior, having a sense of remorse, and shame because of their behavior (Terry & Ackerman, 2008). More commonly, the abuse stopped because of external reasons, like being removed from the parishes and situations in which they could abuse. Others stopped because of a combination of internal and external reasons. John Jay report (2004) noted that no priest had said that the vow of celibate chastity was the problem. The challenges that this issue raises are many.

Challenges

Challenges could be addressed through the following three points: a theological reflection on this issue, commissions that audit these issues, and addressing the issue in formation and ongoing formation. The document *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) and *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016) are two Church documents that address how the Church understands the many challenges of formation in today's post-modern world. At the episcopacy level there would need to be an understanding of constitutive synodality ("International Theological Commission," 2018) and circularity, affective collegiality (Baker, 2009), Episcopal communion (Pope Francis, 2018) and dissent among the ranks (Strykowski, 2018).

Theological Understandings through Reflection. The role of theologians would be and should be that they reflect on the presence and impact of this issue on the Church today i.e. the consequences for the victims, for secondary victims, and for the church. Also, a major theological question is: What is the role of the priest today? What does a priest do today? We see in most countries, that they do all kinds of things that don't have to do necessarily with a priestly pastoral and spiritual ministry. They are involved in administration, bureaucracy, organization, for which they don't receive specific training and supervision. Can a theology of priesthood (and episcopacy) bring in what is essential today and how it should be defined today? Also, how do we understand being a Church in the world today? What do we need to learn in relation to modern society, modern science, modern administration? Therefore, we need to reflect within the context of the day-to-day life in which we live. For example, in an era of mass communications, of social media, of transparency, of authenticity, etc., we need to reflect on the impact these variables have on the faith life of clerics, non-clerics, their relationships

with each other and laity, and their relationship with God (McDermott, 2018).

Commissions or Examining bodies. The role of commissions, grievance cells/committees, that investigate such issues should be strengthened in a manner that is transparent. A possibility could be the setting up of bodies comprising laity as well as clergy and religious - all experts who can examine evidence professionally. This calls for increased lay participation in the church, and perhaps the increasing participation of the laity will spur a healthy conversation about the relationship between politics and the Gospel, within the church (McCormick, 2018). A caution is that outside groups could attempt to define the terms of this participation. Therefore, promoting a language more authentic to the church—one of sin, reparation, mercy, and holiness—would not only allow the church to transcend such debates but would also allow it to enter more fully into its own mission.

Canon Law. Canon law doesn't have detailed and clearly defined lists of punishments for clearly defined crimes. The punishments need to be concrete whether it be a formee (brother), priest, sister, bishop or a layperson who has indulged in or covered up abuses. Also, until now the punishments for a non-cleric who has abused a minor are not clearly specified. There is no church-specified punishment for any layperson either. These need to be addressed (McDermott, 2018).

Formators and Formation. Formators face the challenge of looking at the personality of formees in today's postmodern context. Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*(PDV) says "Of special importance is the capacity to relate to others. This is truly fundamental for a person who is called to be responsible for a community and to be a 'man of communion' and 'a man of mission and dialogue' (PDV 17)." PDV nos. 43-44 focuses on important elements in formation which include a formees capacity to relate to others, the ability to form true friendships, affective maturity, and sexual education. It demarcates signs of maturity such as having solid peer relationships, passionate living, flexible, clear boundaries, and empathy. Signs of arrest included isolation, lack of peer relationships, emotionally immature behavior, excessive intellectualization/rationalization, being personally controlling, judgmentalism/ inflexibility, and using sexual innuendos and sexualized speech.

The major challenges in formation today for formees and formators is the difficulty that the formees have in forming a stable Self, especially regarding communication, mobility, and values. They also have fragile egos and floating relationships. Some come from families with elements

of dysfunction. They are unable to form close relationships and their relationships often are distant. There is insufficient religious knowledge and practice, and they often lack the intellectual capacity to go through a rigorous formation (PDV 51).

Law of Graduality. Therefore, during formation and at admission perfection should not be expected but issues that could arise should be anticipated as far as is possible. The law of graduality should be followed as stated in *Familiaris Consortio*. The law of graduality is the notion that people improve their relationship with God and grow in the virtues gradually, and do not jump to perfection in a single step. In terms of pastoral care, it suggests that it is often better to encourage (Heb 3:13) the positive elements in someone's life rather than to chastise their flaws (Akin, 2014). It does not mean that the content of the law is compromised but that failings are recognized and that persons correspond to the demands of the law over time.

The motivation for celibate and consecrated life must be considered and attention and screening to exclude as far as possible potential perpetrators should be done. Screening to understand whether candidates who have been victims of abuse – as minors or adults, must be considered to see if they are ready for admission or not. This is because many survivors cope surprisingly well and difficulties in formation are not only caused by a history of abuse.

Therefore, the practical outcomes for congregations and dioceses are for initial and ongoing formation. There must be an adequate accompaniment, and the importance of the psycho-affective sphere throughout the formation process cannot be stressed enough. There should be sincere encounters between formee and formator and workshops on personal integration should be conducted right through formation with a focus on the teachings of the Catholic Church. If there are crises and challenges, there are also responses to the crises and challenges.

Responses

Firstly, it must be said that most clergy and religious are not men in crises. Most of them are well integrated, make a lot of sacrifices and give up a lot in the service of the Church. Secondly, there are several Church documents that contain guidelines for formation and ongoing formation. Thirdly, the Church's contribution to various aspects of nation and community building, as well as in the lives of the faithful needs also to be emphasized e.g. health, education and the social work spheres being just three of them.

There are three key points in the formation of clergy and religious, which should be looked at critically and from the vantage point of responses. They are early and ongoing training in managerial skills, addressing crises at points of transition that include psychological, and spiritual crises, and, careerism. There should be an emphasis on formation for a mission that is other-oriented. I expand these three points through (a) guidelines in formation and (b) prevention, deterrence, and treatment.

Guidelines in formation. Guidelines should incorporate the following: identifying the presence of fundamental markers of human maturity; highlighting strengths and internal resources available for formation work and future pastoral ministry; identifying vulnerabilities that need to be addressed in the course of formation; confronting the formee with reliable information about himself that he may be tempted to resist; noting factors that will influence how formation staff can most effectively work with the formee and offering the support the formee needs; and helping integrate the various pillars or dimensions of formation as described in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) and Pope Francis' *Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016).

Prevention, Deterrence, and Treatment. Prevention policies in the Church should consider situational and social factors that could influence future harmful behavior, as new opportunities would arise over time, and offenders could adapt and change their modus operandi. Therefore, strategies should incorporate a general framework that can be adapted to new situations using new techniques.

Some measures could be to increase the effort it takes for priests to commit acts of abuse by implementing mandatory safe environment training to raise awareness among priests and enforcing the zero-tolerance policy for abusers, which would make the risk greater if one is recognized as an abuser (Coughlin, 2003). A periodic evaluation of the performance of priests so that questionable behavior would be more likely to be detected and controlled, should be instituted (Wasserman, 2017). Priests should acknowledge the importance of structures of accountability and transparency such as safe environment and audit programs. These should be implemented and maintained in a timely way (Rossetti, 2004).

Priests should find alternate outlets for close and age-appropriate bonds thus lessening the need for them to develop inappropriate social bonds. They should participate in priest groups which would decrease the likelihood of isolation and stress. Stress-reduction seminars could help prevent provocations, especially after transitions. Excuses could be reduced through education about what types of behavior are and are not

appropriate with minors. The ability to use techniques of neutralization should be removed, whereby excuses to justify inappropriate behavior are given (Guerzoni, & Graham, 2015). Socialization to the life of a priest especially with a focus on issues of intimacy and isolation are important. These might better equip formees to adjust to the loneliness and realities of the life of celibate chastity.

Therefore, change must come from the leaders, and the changes should be strongly implemented. Changes can be achieved through transparency in reporting and dealing with abuse. It should be ensured that transparency/accountability structures become routine, and part of the ordinary practices and culture of the Church. This may involve the creation of review boards in parishes and dioceses. Thus, with continued transparency and accountability mechanisms in place, changes can become institutionalized. The church can use the speed of politics to its advantage, as in the case of prelates who have cooperated with investigations on sexual abuse (McCormick, 2018).

Members of the Church should be assured that the Church is committed to responding to all incidents of sexual abuse. Church members should be updated about steps taken to achieve changes through a safe environment and audit programs and through gaining a better grasp of the problem by commissioning studies about the sexual abuse problem. They should be informed about how the church has acted. This would help in greater openness. Transparency requires that the whole church community is engaged at all levels, including laity and clergy, to maintain vigilance in the prevention of abuse.

Conclusion

Carr (2018), in his article ‘Eight lessons to help us move forward from the sex abuse crisis,’ published in ‘America’ Magazine gives some tips about moving forward. As much as they are applicable to the Catholic world at large, they are also applicable to the Indian Church. Three of the eight points are given below and have been edited to fit the Indian context.

1. Attention needs to be focused on the needs of the vulnerable, and their families, not the protection of the institution or the care of perpetrators.
2. There must be independent, credible and effective ways for reporting, and perpetrators should be investigated and held accountable for their behaviors, abuse of power, actions, and non-actions about sexual abuse.
3. We should also beware of those who use the suffering of survivors to settle scores or to advance their own agendas.

The Crisis in the Church might be viewed as a call to today's priests to live their vocations with positive integrity. This message needs to be reinforced by brother priests, the seminary, and the bishops/major superiors. An internalized sense of celibacy is necessary. Celibacy is a "yes" to our humanity and a "yes" to the powerful presence of God in our lives. It is a positive, passionate life of relating and loving. There are real problems but there also are miracles being carried out by priests and religious of the Catholic Church.

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