

## MYTHS ABOUT CLERGY ABUSE

by [Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R.](#) / Virtus Online Bulletin / February 9, 2020

Facilitators are often faced with statements by participants who have drawn certain conclusions about the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. The person makes an erroneous statement as if it is both logical and accurate, but the content is not always based on facts. In fact, most of these statements about clergy sexual abuse can only be characterized as “myths.” Evidence-based research provides a solid foundation for facilitators by offering sound, verifiable data to counter these types of common assertions.<sup>1</sup> Separating the myths from the facts will help facilitators to speak more confidently about clergy questions that arise in the training sessions.

### **Myth: It is more common for Catholic priests to be abusers (than other groups of males).**

The media attention to the problems in the Catholic church have left many with the opinion and/or impression that the problem of child sexual abuse is greater among Catholic clergy. But, the research shows this is not the case-and that during similar time periods, they abuse at the same rate as other groups of males.

According to the comprehensive review of clergy personnel files that was the basis of the original John Jay Study, approximately four percent of Catholic priests had credible allegations of child sexual abuse against them over a period of 50 years. Although no other group of men, i.e., coaches, teachers, parents, etc., have been studied in the exact same way, a U.S. Department of Education study found that six percent of teachers from public schools also had credible claims of child sexual abuse. Another study, completed before the John Jay Study, indicated that between 3 and 5 percent of the male population meet the diagnostic criteria for pedophilia. While suffering from pedophilia is clearly different from acting in such a way that abuses children, those numbers increase substantially when including men who sexually abuse teens.<sup>2</sup>

Even a review of insurance claims for child sexual abuse shows that there is no difference in the numbers between Catholic and non-Catholic groups of men.<sup>3</sup>

### **Myth: Child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy is common today.**

In the 1970s, there was an average of 660 cases in the Church; whereas just after the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (Charter) was adopted, that average reduced to twelve per year. Since 2014, there has been approximately one new case a year.<sup>4</sup> This, of course, does not make the fact that children were abused any better. But, if you listen to the media, it seems as though the problem of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests is still as common of an occurrence today. Rarely does a newspaper article fully explain that the cases that are being discussed now (and that have been disclosed relatively recently) occurred decades ago. However, even the recent report by the Pennsylvania Attorney General’s Grand Jury admitted that there had only been two credible allegations against priests in the diocese since the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (Charter) was adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002.<sup>5</sup> The report also noted that both of those cases were handled appropriately and consistently with the law in Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Plante, T.G. “Top 10 Myths About Clergy Abuse in the Catholic Church,” *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/do-the-right-thing/201908/top-10-myths-about-clergy-abuse-in-the-catholic-church>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., citing Zech (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Plante at 2.

<sup>5</sup> Pennsylvania Diocese Victims Report, <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov/report>, p. 305 of 887.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid at 302 and 305.

While it is impossible to promise that there will never be another priest molesting children, it is clear that the work done by each Diocese per the implementation of the Charter has had a profound and lasting impact on the issue in the Catholic Church.

**Myth: Most priest offenders molested hundreds of children.**

There are those in the Church's history who are guilty of harming hundreds of children by committing these heinous acts. Fr. John Geoghan, Fr. James Porter, and Fr. Gilbert Gauthe are among the most notorious of these types of serial offenders. However, while prominent, these cases are not representative of all the allegations against clergy over the years. In fact, as previously stated, approximately four percent of the 109,694 priests and religious serving in parish ministry over the past 50 years had credible allegations of child sexual abuse against them (4,392). These allegations number 11,404 in total. However, 149 of those priests and religious accounted for 26 percent of the total allegations.<sup>7</sup> These were the serial offenders. This minority found their way into the priesthood and took advantage of the trusting nature of the faithful and the opportunity of access to young boys to satisfy their own personal sexual wants. The Catholic Church is not a "safe harbor" for serial offenders. The legacy of pain left by these men is not something we will ever "get over." It is clear, however; that the Church is on the way to assuring that nothing like this ever happens again.

**Myth: There have been fewer reports of child sexual abuse by clergy in recent years simply because of the time it takes for victims to come forward (decades).**

We live in a very different time now than the 1960s-1980s, when most of the reported abuse occurred. The children who were molested by clergy during that time had no real recourse or avenue for reporting. The child protection system we know today was not established until Congress adopted a law establishing this system in 1974,<sup>8</sup> which was the first time states were required to create child protection units to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect. Just 40 years ago, there was no system dedicated to the protection of children from abuse. Even then, with what was investigated, the emphasis was on physical abuse. Neglect and the sexual abuse of children was not the focus of the old legislation.

In addition, there was a cultural reluctance to come forward during that timeframe, and, sadly, some good reasons to keep quiet. First and foremost, people simply did not believe children's reports of abuse, particularly when they were accusing a family member, a priest, a coach, or another respected adult member of the community. In recent years, this has changed. Child protection services and law enforcement are aware that fewer than 5 percent of allegations by children are deliberately false and a large percentage of those arise in custody cases,<sup>9</sup> and so, people are more willing to listen to a child's disclosure and report it. Today, all states have laws that mandate reporting and many require all citizens to come forward and allow children to make allegations.

**Myth: All cases of child abuse against the Church involve lies.**

We know that most children are not lying when they disclose child sexual abuse. However, it is also the case that not all cases of allegations of child sexual abuse made by adults against clergy

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<sup>7</sup> *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002*, A Research of the John Jay School of Criminal Justice Study, February 2004. Pp 26-28, 57-58/

<sup>8</sup> *To Establish a National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1973: Hearings on H.R. 6379, H.R. 10552, and H.R. 10968*. Before the Select Subcommittee on Educ. of the House Comm. on Educ. and Labor, 93rd Cong. 1st Sess. (1977) (Hereinafter House Comm.).

<sup>9</sup> Everson, M., & Boat, B. (1989). "False Allegations of Sexual Abuse by Children and Adolescents," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28(2), 230-235.

are supported by the facts. While most reports are sincere and true, unfortunately, other psychological and psychiatric issues can promote hallucinations and delusions that unfortunately leave people with distorted memories that cannot be corroborated with known evidence. There are also some people who are greatly influenced or manipulated by therapists, lawyers and others to report intentionally false allegations for purposes of securing money or revenge for a perceived wrong. Two high profile examples of false allegations were those made against Cardinal Bernadine in Chicago and Cardinal Mahoney in Los Angeles. After careful investigation, it was determined that both these claims were entirely false.

As we have seen recently, Bishops and Cardinals and other high-ranking Church officials have hidden their own crimes of abuse. Given all these situations, it is important to take allegations seriously and to investigate them thoroughly by an independent investigator. History tells us that most of these allegations are valid and based on facts. Regardless, a thorough review of the facts is necessary in all cases.

### **Conclusion**

Myths are generally accepted “truths” that have may have some strains of truth in them. When doing the work of facilitation, there will always be myths to dispel. The myths in this article are prevalent in the discussion about clergy abuse in the Church. Facilitators need to know what is fact and what is fiction. One of our jobs is to see that the participants depart from a session with a clearer understanding of the nature and scope of the problem and an ability to lie to rest any myths that threaten their ability to create and maintain safe environments. Having the verifiable information to dispel common myths is an important part of this objective.

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