The Clergy Sexual Abuse System

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Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, (NCR, May 9, 2016). *Childhood abuse and neglect take their toll*.


Donald Cozzens, (2002). *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church*

Barbara Balboni (1998). *Through the "Lens" of the Organizational Culture Perspective: A Descriptive Study of American Catholic Bishops' Understanding of the Sexual Molestation and Abuse of Children and Adolescents*

Our bias:
Catholics should **not try to minimize** the current crisis facing the Church by making reference to the **small percentage of abusive priests** in their midst or dismissing reports about scandal as **media exaggeration**. Why?
Because: “A priest is supposed to be a holy person you can trust. If he’s not, then that’s news. If it wasn’t, that would be a terrible thing. We cannot escape the horror of this by pointing out that almost all priests serve faithfully — though that fact is a grace that gives joy to the Catholic people. **But even one priest gone wrong causes immense harm,** and throughout the world priests have done unspeakable evil.” — Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto (March 30, 2010)
First a few numbers (always changing)

Compiled by BishopAccountability.org from reports commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (updated May 20, 2016) and from Frontline/PBS, a 2014 report from the Vatican, and several others.
From 1950 through June 30, 2015, out of a total of 116,153 priests who have worked in those years, the USCCB has counted 6,528 clerics "not implausibly" and "credibly" accused of sexually abusing minors, representing 5.6% of the priests (in Spotlight, Sipe estimated 6%).

In 2004, the Nashville Diocese reported that since 1950 7 of 378 (almost 2%) priests had been 'credibly accused'
Sexual abuse allegations in the U.S. Catholic Church

Combined totals: Dioceses, eparchies and religious institutes

Substantiated or determined to be true

Unsubstantiated or determined to be false

Source: United States Conference Of Catholic Bishops
Between 2004 and 2014, worldwide, more than 3,400 credible cases of abuse had been referred to the Vatican. 848 priests had been defrocked, and another 2,572 given lesser sanctions.
As of May 20, 2016, the USCCB has counted 17,651 victims/survivors known to the bishops in the period 1950 through June 30, 2015, and as of 2004, of all the victim/survivors,

† 81% were male
† 22% were younger than age 10
† 51% were between the ages of 11 and 14
† 27% were between the ages of 15 and 17 years
† Female victims tended to be younger than the males
A.W. Richard Sipe, a key figure in *Spotlight*, wrote *Unspeakable Damage: The Effects of Clergy Sexual Abuse* (2009): There are

† Persons who **can’t continue their studies** because the **injury to self esteem** is so fundamental that they simply are unable to muster the energy or confidence necessary to master tasks that are easily within their natural potential. Interference with education also **limits earning potential**.

† Persons who **plunge into the world of crime** because the abuse makes them feel that that is where they belong.
† Persons who get caught in their **addictive self-medication** to the degree that they run afoul of family, work, law, and impair their health and life.

† Some **persons who overdose**, who end up in fatal car accidents, who contract incurable diseases like AIDS, who get themselves murdered do not leave suicide notes, but their fate was sealed by their abuse. They are **completing what the abusive priest or bishop began**—the death of their sense of self-preservation.
Childhood abuse and neglect take their toll —
Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea (NCR, May 9, 2016)

† **Physical health**: It is now clear that early trauma is correlated with a plethora of symptoms and disorders potentially disrupting virtually every system of the human body.

† **Cognition**: The survivor often has attention deficits, memory problems and an inability to concentrate consistently.

† **Emotions/affect**: When a child is overwhelmed by abuse, especially over time, the autonomic nervous system is overstimulated, creating anxiety and fear and releasing stress hormones.
Cognitive integrity shatters and becomes locked in rigidly inflexible, self-centered thought patterns, simplistic black-and-white opinions devoid of nuance and an immutable conviction that the future is destined to be both short and unalterably dim. Today, we can actually view this happening on PET scans that show different brain areas lightening and darkening when a trauma survivor's stress level changes, . . . indicating that trauma actually changes the neurobiology of the brain.
† **Relationships/intimacy**: Survivors' expectations of others are forged in the fires of trauma. Often needy, but *expecting rejection, neglect or worse from others*, they may shift rapidly from dependent clinging to rage or cold aloofness. Often the adult survivor's history is littered with unsuccessful friendships, work relationships, and romances that confuse and hurt both them and those around them.

† **Sense of self**: Survivors often have a fractured sense of self.
† **Behaviors:** Most survivors think that they were somehow responsible for what happened to them. Depending on the nature of the adverse childhood experience, survivors feel dirty, ashamed, worthless and self-loathing. Often they take their *guilt, rage and self-hatred* out on themselves through *self-destructive behaviors* like substance abuse (which also deadens psychic pain); promiscuous and unprotected sex; making suicidal gestures. Sometimes they die.

† **Spirituality:** Research indicates that many survivors turn away from religion and even from God.
Costs

✶ sex-abuse related costs incurred by the church (between 1950 to 2002) totaled $573 million, with $219 million covered by insurance companies

✶ N.B.: As an update, a 2015 NCR study estimated that, between 1950 and 2015, the church has paid out almost $4 billion in “settlements related to the sexual abuse of children by pedophile priests.”
What sexual abuse allegations have cost the U.S. Catholic Church

Total Spending $2.6 billion from 2004-2012

- 75% Settlements
- 2% Other costs
- 15% Attorneys
- 5% Support for offenders
- 3% Therapy for victims

Source: United States Conference Of Catholic Bishops
Finally, in people costs, the scandal led to a loss of 2 million Catholics, 3% of the membership, . . . economist Daniel Hungerman of Notre Dame University estimated in a 2011 working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research.
Currently, the AP reports that the new tribunal created by Pope Francis to handle “abuse of office” charges against bishops accused of covering up abuse cases, essentially is going nowhere. It has been mired from the beginning in conflicting jurisdictions and unclear lines of authority, and so far has not taken up a single case.
Pope Francis has signed a **new universal law** for the global Catholic church specifying that **a bishop's negligence in response to clergy sexual abuse can lead to his removal from office.** (NCR) One of the specifications added by the document is the fact that negligence of the bishop “in particular in relation to cases of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults” is now one of the “**grave reasons**” that would legitimize the removal of a bishop from his position. (Crux)
The Catholic Church
v.
the Boston Globe

The movie is an investigative reporting procedural.
THE CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE SYSTEM
What is a system?

An overly simple definition: A system is a

- Large complex whole
- Many parts
- Part relates to part
- The whole is greater than the sum of the parts
- Changing one part affects other parts and the whole
The clergy sexual abuse system portrayed in *Spotlight* and in *The clergy sexual abuse crisis* had two major components, both entailing **THE ABUSE OF POWER**

† Priests abused their power by abusing children (and adult parishioners)

† Bishops abused their power by mismanaging incidents of clergy sex abuse, especially, but not exclusively, by relocating the abusing priests
To illustrate the complexity of the system, Ferder and Heagle (May 2002), in the National Catholic Reporter, succinctly described several of the more salient and controversial theories sparked by Cardinal Law's plight in Boston:

† **The ancient history theory**: Most of these are old cases. They happened 20 or 30 years ago.

† **The rotten fruit theory**: Every organization has a few "bad apples" in the bushel.
† **The ontological sameness theory**: Priests are only human and have the same weaknesses and dysfunctions that characterize other males in our culture.

† **The Vatican theory**: This is primarily a problem of materialistic, self-indulgent *industrialized cultures* such as the **United States**, Canada, and Europe.

† **The lax morals theory**: Priests who sexually abuse minors are the outcome of a *permissive* attitude toward sexual morals fostered by *liberal theologians*. 
† **The "gays did it" theory**: Most victim/survivors are boys.

† **The media conspiracy theory**: The press is out to get Catholics.

† **The celibacy theory**: The frustrations caused by imposed sexual abstinence cause clergy sexual abuse.
No single theory, regardless of degree of validity or ideological orientation, is adequate without careful consideration of the others and of many additional ethical, human science, and ecclesiological factors. The phenomenon of the Catholic Church's clergy sexual abuse scandal must be viewed as a complex social system in which part relates to part, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is hard to know where to begin.
A sketch of the system

*The act of a particular priest sexually abusing a child takes place in a richly woven tapestry of contexts. (a) THE PRIEST'S PERSONAL LIFE HISTORY sets the stage for his initiation into the career of a clergy sexual abuser –

† from the nature of his family and cultural background;
‡ to his socialization and developmental history, especially as it relates to his psychosexual
to his experiences in the church prior to choosing to enter the priesthood;

to the nature of his seminary training;

to the kind of social support as a priest he received from his family and friends, parishioners, fellow priests, and the church hierarchy;

to the organizational climate or culture of the church at world, national, diocesan, and local levels;
to the particulars of the parishes and other church settings he encountered during his priesthood;
to the kinds of interactions he had with children and their families;
to the particular interactions he had with his victims and their families.
The personal life history of a particular abusing Catholic priest falls within a (b) **LARGER CONTEXT**, starting with

† the **history and traditions of the Catholic Church**
– its understandings of the **nature of the church** and the **nature of the priesthood**.
†The Catholic faithful believe the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, although there is debate and controversy about how these marks of the church have been manifested historically and how they should be manifested as the church moves into the future, especially in light of the tension between the hierarchical and more communal models of the church identified in Vatican II.
The current understanding of the priesthood is that its members must be exclusively male and celibate, although, whether the Vatican approves or not, debate and controversy are rampant about whether or not these features should characterize the priesthood of the future. The current clergy sexual abuse scandal has fueled both these controversies, and many Catholics are calling for rethinking and changes in church policy.
Once a particular priest sexually abuses a child in the contexts of his own life world and that of the church, the reactions and consequences that may or may not ensue become crucial aspects of the clergy sexual abuse system. It is helpful to view the situation from the perspective of professional ethics:
† if, as with members of other professions, a priest should follow medicine's Hippocratic oath and *first of all do no harm*, then we should begin with

† the priest's *child victims and their families*, who are the first and perhaps main persons harmed in the clergy sexual abuse system.
• abuse by a priest traumatizes children, and they and their families often experience ongoing post-traumatic stress. The combination of their ongoing victimization by priestly serial predators and the uncaring, often hostile treatment they receive from church officials once the officials learn about the abuse amounts to victimization and revictimization.
† clergy sexual abuse violates the social covenant that is the church, thus enlarging the circle of the abuse's socially corrosive and harmful effects. Boston reminds us that clergy sexual abuse may be well or poorly handled by cardinals, bishops, and other church officials, including those in the Vatican.
there is a myriad of (d) OTHER SYSTEMIC INFLUENCES, including:

† existing (or nonexistent) church policies,

† insurance companies,

† lawyers representing the church and the victims, and, of course,

† the media affect the way the church deals with its abusing priests and their victims.
a potentially quite significant influence on the clergy sexual abuse system, honored more in the breach than in the observance, is the involvement/ lack of involvement of the laity in helping the church understand and address the problem.
The other side of the lack of involvement of the laity is clericalism
In characterizing the organizational culture of the Catholic Church, former seminary rector Donald Cozzens, in his *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church* (2002), stresses the role of clericalism, the crucial yet destructive modus operandi characterizing much of the way the church pursues its mission. Clericalism, says Cozzens, is "always dysfunctional and haughty, crippling the spiritual and emotional maturity of the priest, bishop, or deacon caught in its web" (117).

Clericalism entails the "concern to promote the particular interests of the clergy and protect the privileges and power that have traditionally been conceded to those in the clerical state."
The Major Superiors added that "clericalism arises from both personal and social dynamics, is expressed in various cultural forms, and often is reinforced by institutional structures. Among its chief features are:

+ an authoritarian style of ministerial leadership,
+ a rigidly hierarchical worldview, and
+ a virtual identification of the holiness and grace of the church with the clerical state.
TWO IMPORTANT STUDIES
Barbara Balboni's (1998) dissertation *Through the "Lens" of the Organizational Culture Perspective: A Descriptive Study of American Catholic Bishops' Understanding of the Sexual Molestation and Abuse of Children and Adolescents* explored some of the ramifications of clericalism by presenting the findings of a carefully conducted set of in-depth interviews with 6 abusing priests and 20 American bishops.
Balboni's intent was to describe and analyze the church's understanding of clergy sexual abuse that occurred from the 1970s through the mid-1980s, prior to the time of major national media exposure or general public awareness. Her work provides the opportunity to learn about the culture of the church as an organization in the words of abusing priests and the bishops themselves.
Balboni's 6 priest-perpetrators came from the New England area, had mostly been sexually involved with pubescent boys, were not currently active priests, and were either the subject of out-of-court settlements or had some form of civil or criminal legal entanglement. Balboni's 20 bishops were active and retired members of the USCCB, from across the country. Of the 48 bishops she asked to participate, 28 declined. Her questioning focused on the clergy sexual abuse situation during the 1970s and 1980s. She took pains to point out that all bishops are not alike.
The overarching theme, one that continues to prevail, was that bishops understood defending and preserving the church as an organization to be their main mission and saw their responses to clergy sexual abuse as good-faith efforts to be faithful to that mission. In the early days of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, bishops attempted to avoid exposing the church to scandal, maintaining the church’s bella figura, and to protect their priests, rather than to give priority to the plight of victims.
They saw clergy sexual abuse as sinful, and laicization was not an option. **Reassignment within the diocese was the norm**; on occasion a priest with a problem might be sent to a neighboring diocese of a friend-bishop. The bishops' treatment of the priests paralleled the way families treated their own problem children and adults.
The second important study considered here, Eugene Kennedy's (1971) extensive empirical study of the American priesthood, *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Psychological Investigations*, commissioned by the American bishops in 1967, was reported on by Balboni.
Using Erik Erikson's human development framework to categorize his data, Kennedy classified the developmental level of the priests he studied as follows:

- 8% maldeveloped,
- 66% underdeveloped,
- 18% developing,
- 7% developed.
In other words, almost three-quarters of the priests were found to be developmentally immature, under 10% having achieved maturity.

Do you think these 1960s statistics hold for today?

Despite these eye-opening and disturbing findings, Balboni claims that the bishops "did little, if anything with the recommendations" from a study they themselves commissioned (225).
One bishop she interviewed said about Kennedy's work:

"It gave clear evidence that we had a big problem. The Bishops . . . just totally refused to look at those studies. And if they had done something right then to meet the problems that were revealed by those studies, we probably could have avoided some of the problems that we got into"
From analysis to reform
as presented in Dokecki (2004)

Required levels of reform of the church community:

- Parish
- Diocese
- National church
- Regional church
- Vatican/papacy

**Three-pronged method:**

1. Human science/community psychology
2. Professional ethics
3. Ecclesiology
Parish reform recommendations
(from Dokecki 2004 [pp. 222-224]):
Reform at the Parish Level

A parish must be a community that enhances the spirituality and authentic human development of its members [Fr. Jim Mallett’s first sermon on becoming pastor of Christ the King in 1986 was on community – *the parish as community*]. Members should be growing spiritually and experiencing a meaningful **psychological sense of community** in the parish community – (1) feeling a deep sense of belonging, (2) being emotionally connected to each other and mutually sharing values, (3) being able to count on each other in times of need, and (4) feeling they have a say in what happens in their parish.
Parishes as communities promoting spirituality and authentic human development must treat the laity as mature adults capable of participating with their priests in democratically structured forums for parish decision making. Parish councils might fill this bill; however, they have had variable success over the years in providing a truly democratic forum for the laity. Nonetheless, some such structure [in the spirit of synodality] is needed, one that operates fully in the open, avoiding characteristic Catholic secrecy.
Such a parish community group, according to Lakeland, could certainly determine things like the ways in which the finances are managed and the causes to which it is ready to contribute. It should certainly feel free to set its own system of religious education in the ways it sees fit. . . . It should definitely make decisions about the stands it will take in social-justice initiatives within the local community.
A key argument throughout the Dokecki book is that parish communities, so understood (in effect, Jim Mallett’s the parish as community), would afford few opportunities for power-abusing priests intent on molesting children.
A sine qua non for a parish functioning as a community is that its **pastor and priests must be leaders-for-community**, who work with the **laity as partners** within **democratic parish governance structures** that encourage dialogue and free and uncoerced communication (Trout, Dokecki, Newbrough, and O'Gorman 2003). The priest as leader-for-community must be a person who has developed the moral character necessary to be such a **servant leader** and must be **psychosexually mature**.
Seminaries must play a role in selecting people of high moral character – screening out persons with significant psychopathology, such as those with abusive tendencies – and helping priests-to-be develop their sexual identity and come to grips with the church's expectations around celibacy (see Cozzens 2000; Kennedy 2001).
Seminaries should also impress on them the importance of avoiding clericalism and being sure their parishes do not become clerical cultures. Parenthetically, the laity must also be helped to avoid encouraging their priests' clericalism.
Priests as leaders-for-community should also be socialized to be authoritative leaders who use their vocation and their ministerial knowledge and skill as Model II professionals, avoiding coercive and authoritarian use of power and dedicating themselves to enhancing community in the parish and promoting their parishioners’ spiritual lives and human development.
More than 10 years after these suggested reforms, they resonate in many ways with Pope Francis’s call for action to promote *synodality* in the church at all levels.
Needed action in our parish?