

AT ISSUE:

Clergy Sexual Abuse in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church: Exploring the Church's Response

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Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people. When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Then He took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:14–16, Good News Translation, Second Edition, 1992)

Personal Insight

This is a story of constant betrayal by self-indulged pillars of our community who through time have created a sacrilegious code of supremacy and secrecy that has left, in its path, personalized horror, carnage, and hopelessness. As a forensic pediatrician, medical director of three child advocacy centers, and an ordained Roman Catholic priest since 1971, I have a unique perspective on the topic of religion and sexual abuse. This statement is meant both as a disclaimer for the injection of my personal opinions and as an explanation for why this article may appear to be particularly critical of the Catholic Church. It is not my intention to suggest that the abuse of children is unique to the Catholic clergy, or indeed, any other institution where the powerful have access to the less powerful. However, it is my profound belief that the sacred process of ordination and consecration of the men who become the shepherds of the Church necessarily means that the perversion of that power is a greater atrocity than when the same acts are committed outside the walls of the sanctuary. It is not meant to minimize in any way the impact on the child, regardless of the background or authority of the perpetrator. It is meant to maximize the sacrilege of the offender. In my capacities as both an ordained Catholic priest and a pediatrician, I have seen the devastation firsthand. I have also lived that trauma in my own extended family. Those involved either have committed suicide or live with depression, addiction, hopelessness, and self-imposed loneliness.

We have all heard and seen the physical and psychological effects of child sexual abuse. Many of these children were hurt by someone who "loved them," resulting in not only physical trauma but also issues of betrayal of a personal relationship. When a member of the clergy abuses a child, it is both a betrayal of a human relationship as well as a relationship with God. When the Church hierarchy is actively protecting itself along with the predators within its fold, expected issues of secrecy and delayed disclosures are intensified.

It is my spiritual belief that these crimes can be compared with no others and can be forgiven only by Him. It is my secular hope that the practitioners reading this will come away with some understanding of the magnitude of the priest sexual abuse scandal, including and especially the massive cover-up perpetrated by the Church, and some insights into the issues involved in treating the victims of this abuse.

History of Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church

It is not surprising that the history of child sexual abuse by representatives of the Church is nearly as old as the history of the Church itself. What may be surprising, given the current state of affairs, is that "very early on the abuse of minors was considered a heinous crime, so much so that guilty clerics have been, at various times, excommunicated, removed from the clerical state and/or cut off from all financial assistance" (Doyle, 2003, p. 191). At the Council of Elvira in Spain, circa AD 309, four canons, or laws promulgated by the Catholic Church, were passed that confronted the sexual behaviors of clerics and delineated the consequences of their child molestation. These sanctions included no communion, excommunication, fasting, and lengthy penances. The penance for priests and bishops was considerably longer—10 to 12 years of fasting (Doyle, 2003). The Third Lateran Council of AD 1179 decided that clergymen who "commit sins against nature" should be forced out of the Church or given a life sentence of detention in a monastery (Doyle, 2003, p. 195). In 1570, a priest who sodomized a boy was defrocked and turned over to secular

authorities, who then decapitated him (Rosetti, Anthony, Cimboic, & Wright, 1996).

Some 1800 years after the first pedophile priests were excommunicated, things have both changed dramatically and remained the same. The sexual abuse has continued. Priests' ordained power and, therefore, perceived trustworthiness have allowed them almost unlimited access to children. Father John Goeghan—who brought clergy sexual abuse to center stage, leading to the subsequent public downfall of Cardinal Law of Boston—and Father Oliver O'Grady—object of the documentary *Deliver Us From Evil* (Baldwin, Brown, Ortenberg, & Berg, 2006) and the one to expose Cardinal Mahony, then a bishop, who knowingly reassigned him to numerous parishes throughout California—among others, used their positions as well as their charm to rape and abuse members of dozens of Catholic families over at least a 20-year period. Father Goeghan allegedly raped or fondled 150 children throughout his career. Father O'Grady's victims ranged from a 9-month-old infant to a middle-aged mother of another adolescent victim.

Astonishingly, despite ample signs and warnings as to their proclivities, the bishops of the Church have moved numerous priests (O'Grady and others) from one parish to another, covering up the reality of what was going on from both the unsuspecting members of each new community and from the police. Church documents show that beginning in 1973, these alarming deeds were done with the Church's full knowledge (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002). It wasn't until 1998 that O'Grady was tried, convicted, and imprisoned for 7 years and then deported to Ireland. He lives there now through the generous retirement package given to him by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in return for not implicating the LA bishop (Baldwin et al., 2006). Father Goeghan was tried in 2003 and convicted of one count of indecent touching. He was sentenced to prison, where in 2004 he was murdered by a fellow inmate who had allegedly been molested as a child.

It is well documented that cases such as these occurred consistently throughout the history of the Church, but it wasn't until the 1980s that the rampant abuse started becoming public knowledge. This code of secrecy was a dramatic departure from the manner in which the early Church made a public spectacle of its discipline of child molesters. How did this change happen?

One explanation lies in the legal authority of the Church itself. Canon law encourages—even requires—Church leaders to engage in secrecy to prevent scandal. If a bishop suspects a cleric has committed sexual abuse, for instance, canon law mandates the bishop to conduct (or delegate) an investigation and then place the results into a secret archive. It is clear that those aware of such investigations were sworn to secrecy and risked excommunication if they spoke out (Doyle, Sipe, & Wall, 2006).

The oath a Pope receives from a bishop when he becomes a cardinal includes the promise to “never reveal to anyone whatever has been confided in me to keep secret and the revelation of which could cause damage or dishonor to the Holy Church” (Doyle et al., 2006, p. 205). With a vow such as this, it is easy to understand how the Church became so secretive, even in the face of the egregious behavior of its clergy.

The Church has also been successful in obtaining the continued secrecy of the victims by financially coercing them into believing it was best to remain silent (Doyle, 2003). Once again, the Catholic Church leaders' primary concern was the public perception of the Church, not the welfare of the innocent victims.

The basic Christian tenet of forgiveness may have also unwittingly contributed to the prevalent silence of the Church. The abusive priest often went for “treatment” at a retreat or alcoholic treatment center, came back forgiven, and was placed in another parish where no one knew of his past. The sacrament of confession was similarly used to the molester's advantage (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002).

In the January 6, 2002, edition of the *Boston Globe*, reporters broke the story of how the archbishop of Boston, Bernard Cardinal Law, and his predecessors had effectively allowed priests to sexually abuse children by perpetuating an elaborate and secretive damage control system that protected the Church's position in the community instead of protecting the welfare of the child victims (Rezendes, 2002). Our children were “abused twice: once by the physical assault, and then by deflection and denial tied to the holy powers of the priesthood and the needs of the clerical culture around it. Priests raped children, and the bishops protected the priests, allowing rape to happen again. And much of this occurred in the name of God” (Carroll, 2002, p. 6).

In response to the *Boston Globe's* exposé, American bishops met in Dallas in June 2002 and again in November 2002. The reports generated from those meetings highlighted the gaps in criminal and child protection laws (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002). Those laws

made it difficult, and in some instances impossible, to hold priests and their superiors accountable. The criminal laws have statutes of limitations that make it impossible to prosecute many crimes of sexual abuse because the victims do not come forward until they reach adulthood and the statute of limitations has passed. Furthermore, the child protection law only requires the reporting of abuse perpetrated by family or household members. This means that adding the position of clergy or clergy administrators to the list of person mandated to report abuse would only require

clergy to report abuse by family or household members and would not reach the problem of abusive clergy. (Mangold, 2003, pp. 162–163)

To include abuse by clergy in the mandated reporting laws would require a much greater expansion of the reporting laws to encompass abuse perpetrated by those outside of the family structure, and outside the current authority of public child protective agencies. The child protection system has no prosecutorial authority. Moreover, “state laws are explicit as to when reports made to child protection can be shared with law enforcement.” (Mangold, 2003, p. 163)

One hopes that widespread expansion of the mandatory reporting laws will be forthcoming as a result of the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal:

To address the problem of hidden abuse by priests (remembering almost never is there a third party to corroborate what the child says), states are examining their criminal laws and their civil child protection laws to discover what gaps can be filled. Abuse by teachers, day care providers, clergy from other religions, and others in authoritative positions (boy scouts) and private settings are examples of similar problem areas. (Mangold, 2003, p. 163)

These national efforts have delved into some of the shortcomings of secular institutions. They have not, however, translated into meaningful reform within the Church on a local level. For example, in my own community, the chancery created a board to address the allegations of abuse by the clergy. Unfortunately, they staffed it with a psychiatrist who, in my opinion, believes that sexual abuse of a child is simply inappropriate behavior and with a judge well known for his lenient treatment of rapists and child molesters, among others. These were the people handpicked by the chancery without assistance from child advocacy centers in two counties. It was clear that the Church was more interested in creating a board that would protect itself rather than creating a body of independent, highly-trained child abuse professionals who could fashion ways in which the perpetrators would be held accountable and the children would be protected.

In fact, the Vatican has recently declared new abuse guidelines and, last June during a homily in St. Peter’s Square, Pope Benedict begged forgiveness from God and from the victims of child abuse by priests. He vowed that the Church would do everything in its power to ensure that it never happens again. But the guidelines and the Pontiff himself have not required the bishops to call the police when they know of or suspect a child sex crime, perhaps the single most important step a bishop could take to protect kids.

Why Priests Sexually Abuse Children

Until the mid-1960s, the Church actively recruited boys as young as 12 years for “the calling,” or a vocation to the priesthood. As one of the last attendees of the minor seminary, having been schooled at the Montfort Seminary until my graduation in 1964, I believe that the institutional Church of that time created a living hypocrisy through its irrational and unrealistic views of human sexuality. How could young seminarians hope to be fully human when the Church labeled sex as evil? It was sometimes tragically impossible for them to reconcile their God-given urges with the Church’s teachings. These young boys were immaturely locked within themselves, failing to develop a healthy sense of human sexuality.

The Church’s stance on sexuality is hardly new. “From the earliest days, when priests were allowed to marry, we find laws telling them to avoid sex” (Doyle et al., 2006, p. 4). During the Council of Elvira, canon law (Canon 33) was enacted to prohibit married priests from having sexual relations with their wives. (Doyle et al., 2006, p. 14)

Not surprisingly, as news of the depth of the sex abuse scandal continued to spread throughout the 1990s, many academic writings on the priest abuse scandal saw the celibacy mandate at the center of the problem. While celibacy does not cause priests to abuse children, it can, especially when imposed at a tender age, stunt the normal sexual and psychological development of the young men so instructed.

Pope John Paul II did not agree. He instead blamed the scandal on the presence of evil and moral decay in America. Despite the Church’s doctrine of infallibility, which states that in areas of faith and morals the Pope’s words are final and cannot be challenged, it is difficult to fathom Pope John Paul II’s request for forgiveness for his abusing priests, suggesting that they were the true victims, not the children (Dale & Alpert, 2007). The Church has found ways not only to protect itself but also to lead its shepherds to other untouched children. In reality, there are plenty of appropriate targets for blame, including

...the thousands of priests who knew that others were abusing children and did nothing...the thousands who looked the other way and failed to speak out in support of the victims...the many priests who stood by in silence while their bishops ran roughshod over victims, lying to them, lying to the public and lying to the clergy because of their obsession with their image and their power.... The regiment is dishonored by those priests who have spoken out but only to voice their self-centered concern about priests’ rights and the tarnished image of the priesthood brought on by “a few”. (Doyle, 2008, para. 3–4)

The Church and all of these children have been “dishonored by those priests and bishops who keep trying to shift the blame to anyone but themselves with idiotic claims such as that of Madison’s Bishop Morlino, who recently announced that the whole problem was caused because people didn’t obey the 1968 anti-birth control encyclical *Humanae Vitae*” (Doyle, 2008, para. 5).

In April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI traveled to the United States and orchestrated closed meetings with five children and their families who had been abused by his priests. A far cry from Pope John Paul II’s plea on behalf of the “victim” priests, it was a moving and compassionate acknowledgement of the trauma suffered by these children. There was even a sense of forgiveness in the air. Nevertheless, the process was not open enough, and absolutely no plan existed to make the bishops responsible or, more importantly, accountable. In Australia in July of 2008, the Pontiff said, “I am deeply sorry for the pain and suffering the victims have endured and I assure them and their parents that I share in their suffering” (Wooden, 2008, para. 14; Simpson, 2008). His apology was stronger in Australia than his comments in the United States, but he did not address the victims’ future, and either their financial or, more importantly, psychological needs. Anthony Foster, the father of two Australian girls who were allegedly raped by a Catholic Priest during their childhood, expressed his disapproval of the Pope’s actions to the press: “What we haven’t had is an unequivocal, unlimited practical response that provides for all the victims for their lifetimes.... The practical response needs to include both financial help...and psychological help” (Sullivan, 2008, para. 9).

Regardless of why the sexual abuse occurred, it is clear that the “Church must change its perspective and deal with the perpetrators as child abusers who happen to be priests instead of as priests who happen to be child abusers” (Dale & Alpert, 2007, p. 71). In other words, it must focus on the criminal nature of the abuse and allow the full and open secular investigation of the allegations.

On March 19, 2010, in his Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland, the Pope delivered what I believe to be his most powerful expression of remorse, decrying the “sinful and criminal acts and the way Church authorities in Ireland dealt with them.” He stated,

No one imagines that this painful situation will be resolved swiftly. Real progress has been made, yet much more remains to be done. Perseverance and prayer are needed, with great trust in the healing power of God’s grace. At the same time, I must also express my conviction that, in order to recover from this grievous wound, the Church in Ireland must first acknowledge before the Lord and *before others* the serious sins committed against defenseless children. Such an acknowledgement, accompanied by sincere sorrow for the damage caused to these victims and

their families, must lead to a concerted effort to ensure the protection of children from similar crimes in the future. (Benedictus PP. XVI, 2010, para. 4)

The Pontiff alluded to the importance of reporting abuse to civil authorities, urging the bishops to “continue to cooperate with the civil authorities” and telling abusers to “submit yourselves to the demands of justice” (Benedictus PP. XVI, 2010, para. 17), but he did not and has not since required it. As strong as this statement is, it failed to acknowledge the Vatican’s failures in the manner in which it handled and continues to handle the scandal. Many believe, as I do, that he again did not address the victims’ real financial and psychological needs.

While I believe in personal growth and transformation, it is hard to accept the sincerity of the Pope’s words when he, as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, wrote and cosigned a letter to all bishops in May 2001 that asserted the Church’s right to hold its child abuse inquiries behind closed doors and keep evidence confidential for up to 10 years after the victims reached adulthood. His cosignor, Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, had previously been quoted as saying, “In my opinion, the demand that a bishop be obligated to contact the police in order to denounce a priest who has admitted the offence of pedophilia is unfounded,” a position which has only recently been repudiated (Hagerty, 2010, para. 8).

In addition, it appears to me that the real impetus for the change in the Church’s response to child abuse allegations has come from the increasing number of lawsuits, both civil and criminal, against both the Church and the abusing clerics as well as the media’s substantially increased coverage of the scandal. According to a research study conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and authorized and paid for by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as a conservative estimate, the Church has paid out over \$500,000,000 relative to the child abuse allegations. These funds have gone to victims for the treatment of priests and for legal expenses. The study did not delineate how much the Church paid to each of these groups. Further grounds for skepticism come from the fact that during the Vatican’s news conference regarding its pedophilia scandal in July 2010, it cited the movement for the ordination of women as offensive as the scandal of priests who sexually assault children (Donadio, 2010).

Professional Response

We are obliged not only to help heal the trauma of our child patients’ abuse but also to protect them from disease and violence. We do this by conducting thorough and forensically sensitive evaluations, which in the medical world involve the SOAP (S-subjective, O-objective, A-assessment, P-plan) process. Often the objective portion of the physical examination is unremarkable, especially if the child is seen many years after the abuse or after he or she has become sexually active. Probably the most critical portion of that exam is the subjective portion because it is often

here that the diagnosis of sexual abuse is more evident. It is essential that one ask the correct questions. These include, among others, “Why are you here today? What can we do to help you? Has anyone touched you in any place that they shouldn’t? Where are those places? Has anyone asked you to keep it secret? Are you worried about yourself or your body?” These open-ended questions are helpful to the child’s healing process and when asked for the purpose of making a diagnosis may be admitted in a court of law as an exception to the hearsay law.

As professionals responding to child maltreatment, we routinely see children who have been victimized by the more powerful. We know that the detection and investigation of child abuse is typically hindered by secrecy and delayed, incomplete disclosures. These are often the direct result of the child and parents’ feelings of fear, denial, and betrayal. How does the victim of sexual abuse by a priest differ from a victim of abuse by another? Should our responses differ? Abuse by a member of the clergy is not only a personal and emotional betrayal, but a spiritual betrayal as well. The secrecy typically seen in child abuse cases is amplified by the unprecedented and systemic cover-up committed by the Church hierarchy. This includes every type of tactic from public attacks on the credibility of the child victim to the payment of hush money to the child’s family. The need for sensitivity and thoroughness during the evaluation is particularly keen. The need for mental health treatment must be carefully determined. The multidisciplinary teams created to protect children in each county should take an active, compassionate, nonjudgmental role in assisting the diocese and their community through this difficult time. Child advocacy centers are well positioned to act in that capacity. There are now 746 child advocacy centers the United States. Not long ago, there was none.

We anticipate that collaborative teams such as child advocacy centers will motivate and mobilize federal activity as happened in the 1960s when all 50 states passed reporting laws before federal action created the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974. No matter what the basic framework, collaboration must be employed to protect our children. There can be no more secrets on any level.

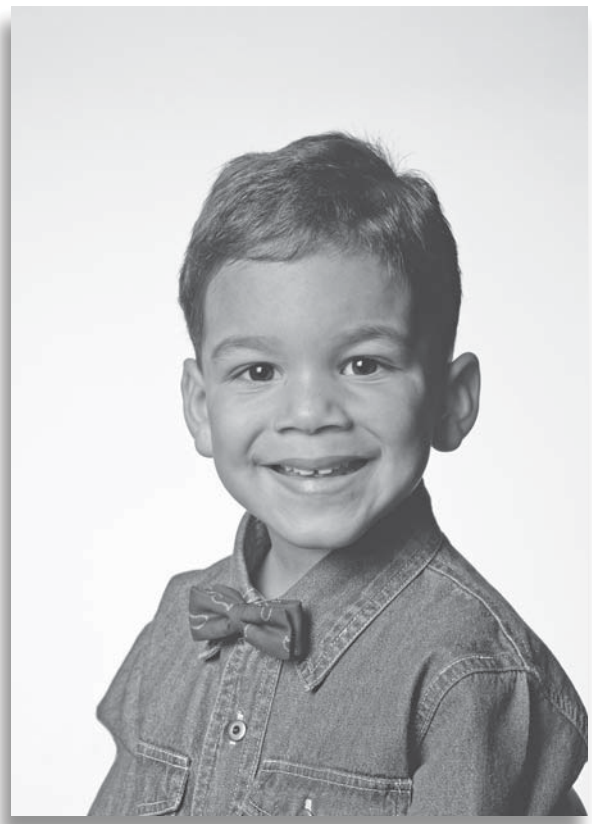
Susan Vivian Mangold suggested four points to guide the reform. I believe it is the mandate of the collaborative team (district attorney, child protection system, police, and medical, mental health, and crisis services) to make this happen, and the physicians’ response should be loud and clear:

First, the mandated reporting system must be expanded not only to require clergy to be mandated reporters but to require that all mandated reporters to report abuse by those in professional positions over children, such as teachers, day care providers, camp counselors, and clergy. Second, reports of abuse by perpetrators outside of the family or house-

hold should be referred to law enforcement, not just child protective services, for investigation, but only after the child’s parents have been notified. Third, criminal records involving child abuse should be maintained by statewide central registries, just as with records of abuse perpetrated by family or household members. Finally, penalties for failure to report abuse must be enforced and should include civil as well as criminal penalties. This already applies to physicians, but seldom do we see the District Attorney charging those physicians who do not report abuse. When this changes, so will their behavior. (Mangold, 2003, pp. 176–177)

The Catholic Church child sexual abuse scandal has actually given us a window of opportunity. With the reforms generated by our multidisciplinary teams and, we hope, spearheaded by child abuse professionals, we can create a more protective environment for children without further overtaxing the child protection system or harming parents or families already suffering due to the abuse of a child.

Since the 1960s, our child protective laws have taken the side of protecting children, requiring that reports be made to authorities whenever there is a *reasonable cause* to suspect abuse. The current system places the names of individuals in state registries whenever



there is *credible evidence* that they have committed abuse against a child. This system is duplicated in all 50 states. Concerned citizens must alert their legislatures that they want their state laws to protect all children. Only with such laws in place will Church policies, which require bishops to follow canon law, have any meaning. Such laws will afford priests the same due process rights that we all receive. Such laws will better protect children and thereby begin to put an end to this tragic chapter in the history of the Catholic Church.

Conclusions

So much has gone unseen—such pain, trauma, and loss of innocence. The church has kept secrets, lied, and made children wrong, guilty, and hopeless. It has created such horrendous, adverse childhood experiences that even the money and forgiveness (which have been short in coming) will likely make no difference in their lives now.

I believe we have a unique opportunity here. Every week, I see up to 12 children in our community who have been sexually abused by a trusted or loved one. As an ordained Roman Catholic priest, I believe our spiritual leaders cannot be allowed to investigate themselves. They need to be held responsible by more than just words, and under no circumstances are they to be moved somewhere else. While secretive boards and tribunals can declare abusers forgiven, these bodies cannot and should not be allowed to declare their fellow priests no longer a threat to the children of their parishes. I find it reprehensible that our priests need a law ordering them to allow civil authorities to do their job. Open investigation should be the Church's innate response so we will have no more adult survivors, but children who can begin to heal because our society and our church have become therapeutic, not secretive.

The Church needs to show compassionate leadership, not only by asking for forgiveness and taking responsibility for the pain their priests have caused but also by assuring us that those who have sexually abused children will never do it again. I believe that the Church is obliged to strip these people of their authority and properly utilize our civil authorities to prosecute accordingly. It's time to devote our energies to the healing process and psychological needs of the victims. The Church needs to embrace a "No Tolerance" philosophy for any form of abuse. That posture alone will bring moral leadership to the Church and to its many charismatic and dedicated priests who have devoted their lives to help us all to better love and serve each other.

Christ asked the children to come to Him. What pain He must have endured to realize His representatives (priests and bishops) would hurt them so. The Catholic Church needs our help. We are uniquely poised, by virtue of our experience and training, to assist the Church in this process. The reward is nothing less than the future health and happiness of the children we serve.

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