

CODE WORDS TO HIDE SEX ABUSE

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The sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church has gone on for so long that a community of researchers, academics, and writers has arisen to study the crisis. Among us are historians, legal scholars, sociologists, psychotherapists and more. But no matter our main discipline, we all have had to struggle with many of the same challenges. The first is coming to terms with the fact that while the Church is famously careful about its records and documents, when it comes to sex and the clergy these documents are obscure to the point of deception.

The people who keep the records for the Church are driven to deceive by the clerical culture of celibacy, which forbids all sexual activity by ordained men. Because it is forbidden, clerical sexual activity is always guarded in secrecy, and individuals expend enormous effort to keep it that way. Whenever the secrets are identified within the Church, officials use code words to keep others in the dark while they establish a record that will be useful to them, but not to an outsider. This is why a search of Church documents for evidence of prior knowledge of sexually abusing priests will rarely turn-up the words *pedophile*, *abuser*, *sex*, or any other direct reference to actual sexual or abusive behavior.

However, those of us who have worked on this issue both from within and outside the Church have noted similar coded terms and euphemisms being used in documents written around the world and at every level of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Below are presented some of the notable terms, phrases, and euphemisms found in statements by clerics, medical and psychiatric reports, priest personnel files, and records of seminaries.²

Codes used by clerical officials

Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City admitted in deposition that “codes” are used between bishops to indicate a priest is having problems about sex. This cardinal’s particular code when he sent a sex-abusing priest to the jurisdiction of Cardinal Roger Mahony was—he is coming for “health

and family reasons.” Cardinal Rivera admitted that it was a code “that any bishop or cardinal would understand.” *

In Belgium a bishop spoke about his long-term sexual involvement with two of his nephews as “a little game.” “Tickling”, "horseplay" and "wrestling" are code words used to cover up sexual grooming or frank sexual activity and abuse of minors. The most extreme example I know of occurred in the conduct of a young assistant pastor who established a sexual bond with a boy when he was 15 and 16.

One of “games” the priest played with the boy while both were naked involved tying him to the bed and then sodomizing him. On one occasion the boy freed one of his legs and began flailing around. In the process he hit the wall hard enough to put a hole in it. The pastor responded to the ruckus, came into the room, and said, “You’re going to have to pay for the repair of that damage. Later when the abuse was litigated the pastor said he thought they were just "horsing around." *

In Delaware a victim—in this instance a policeman—reported in writing to law enforcement authorities “unlawful sexual behaviors” and “exchange of sexual favors” between a priest and a teen. The religious superior who retained the priest on the faculty of a high school where he subsequently offended again recorded that the behavior was merely “inappropriate horseplay and unprofessional behavior.” *

Similar methods of coding are used to obscure behaviors or suspicions of tendencies of sexual propensities in seminary students. Seminarians who as priests subsequently abuse minors often can be spotted by an analysis of earlier records.

A report by Robert J. McAllister, M.D. on 100 hospitalized priest patients at Seton Psychiatric Institute concluded that 77 demonstrated serious emotional problems as seminarians; 32 ultimately became alcoholics. TIME Magazine, April 2, 1965. This study did not report on the number of these priests with sexual problems, but I began training at Seton the same year and can testify that many of the priests who were designated with “alcohol problems” were in fact sexual.

I have found references described as behaviors that “raise grave doubts about his suitability for the priesthood” or there remain “serious questions

about his health and fitness”. Similar euphemistic phrases include “evidence of questionable judgment” and references to “immaturity” or a “problem personality.” *Records from the Tucson Diocese under bishop Moreno are one example of offending priests are re-labeled and secreted in chancery office positions. The *Murphy Report* from Dublin (01-11-11) records how Frs. Cicero & Ivan Payne, and Fr. Tony Walsh all described as notorious child abusers were or could be hidden in work for the tribunal office.

Perhaps one of the most direct phrasings I could find in a seminary file were revealed in the case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthé of Louisiana whose criminal case of sexual assault on boys in 1984 anticipated the Catholic clerical crisis in the United States. His seminary files noted an “affinity for boys” and “a moral problem with boys”. Nevertheless he was ordained and sent to work in parishes.

“Moral impediment” is a phrase found in the seminary record of Fr. Daniel McGuire, S.J. who was ordained in despite it. He enjoyed prominence as a retreat master and spiritual counselor and even the endorsement of Mother Teresa during his clerical career. Although his improprieties with young boys was known by his religious superiors already in (1969) it was only in 2000 that he was convicted of sexual abuse of minors and sentenced to prison

Codes and euphemisms in psychiatry

The church has not been alone in handling sex abuse by Catholic bishops and priests as a hot potato, disguising behavior with alternative designations to identify, record, and hide it. I know from my years in association and observation of the psychiatric community and reviewing many medical histories of priests that pedophilia (under its current and appropriate definition) was noted, but classified and treated under various coded terms.

From the 1920s through the 1950s schizophrenia was a commonly used term to describe the mental state of a priest who was involved in sex with children. Fr. Gerald Fitzgerald wrote in 1957 to a bishop who wanted to send a pedophile priest to the Via Coeli treatment center, “From our long experience with characters of this type...most of these men would be clinically classified as schizophrenic.” (Fitzgerald to Bishop Brady 9/57.) He was also convinced by that time and stated clearly that priests who got involved sexually with children could not be cured.

Priest/psychiatrist Thomas Verner Moore was an early advocate for mental health of clergy and wrote articles in popular clerical journals about the careful selection of candidates for religious life. * He taught staff and treated patients at Mount Hope Hospital (Seton Psychiatric Institute) from 1923 onward. Records even from 1962 show his lasting imprint on thinking about priest abusers. One sexually abusive priest was labeled a “paranoid schizophrenic”. He had been treated twice before for “depression.” He admitted a history of abusing at least five boys a year during the course of his twenty- two-year ministry.

The reason for these psychiatric categorizations did have logic: the conscious decision of a priest was to be celibate. He could not be a priest if he did not promise celibacy. Since he wanted to be a clergyman and his behavior was diametrically opposed to this desire he had to have a “split personality.” His behavior demonstrated primarily that he was “crazy” and schizophrenia or depression were available diagnoses at that time. If his craziness could be controlled he would behave appropriately; but his diagnosis was not seen as amenable to cure, just management.

The same logic applied to “alcoholism” in an abusive priest. Alcoholism has long been known as a problem among Catholic clergy. The lifetime incidence of alcoholism is twice as high in Catholic clergy (20 percent) than recorded in the general population. Hospitals and treatment centers for priests contemplated and established since the 1930s always named alcohol abuse as one major motivation for founding these centers. But in truth, scores of the priests and bishops in this group were acting out sexually with children or adolescents. Drinking was a more benign diagnosis—less damaging to the reputation of the clergy and the church than any direct recognition of sexual involvement. It was not politically tolerable to use the word *pervert*.

The reasoning behind this psychiatric decision rested in the belief “if you could keep father sober, he would not act in these *sinful* ways.” The idea also prevailed that if father was drunk at the time of his sexual encounter that rendered the sexual element more understandable and less culpable.

“Depression” is also found as a diagnosis in the medical files of priests who commit sex crimes. As a psychiatric designation depression is well known and common in U.S. culture. Mental health research has estimated that 7.9 to

8.6 percent of adults will experience a major depression during their lifetime. During my years in training and on the staff of a Catholic hospital it was common to have a priest patient who had sexually abused minors to be diagnosed as suffering from depression. And indeed, many priest patients did suffer from depressive symptoms. They had been caught, but in many cases the diagnosis was rendered as a cover, diminishment, or disregard of the major psychiatric element—inability to control sexual behavior toward children and adolescents. It sounded much better to say that father was in the hospital for depression (or exhaustion, another euphemism) than to admit he was caught abusing children or call him a “pervert”.

Before it was removed from the list of disorders in the *Diagnosics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* “homosexuality” was often listed as a diagnosis for priests who were, in fact, sexually active with minors. In 1968 this psychiatric cover was somewhat understandable.

The texts recorded, *“Pedophilia, or a pathological sexual interest in children is regarded as a variant of homosexuality in which the homosexual strivings are directed toward children.”* The perpetrator was considered weak and impotent, his actions reincarnations of his wishes for his mother’s love, and because of insecurity and self-doubt he functioned on an immature psychosexual level. This was the 1968 opinion of Lawrence C. Kolb, M.D.

However, in the decades since homosexuality was removed from the DSM, This confusion of pedophilia (ephebophilia) and homosexuality is longstanding, but inaccurate and detrimental to the real understanding and treatment of men who are genuinely addicted to sex with minors.

Among other terms widely used by medical professionals to disguise the true nature of a priest’s sexual problems I also found the following in records:

- “suffering from moderate frustration neurosis”
- "problematic behavior"
- "serious weakness"
- "area of difficulty"
- "moral impediment"
- "dubious personality"
- "indiscretion"
- "imprudence"
- "unfortunate incidents"

"uncomfortable situation"
"excessive stress"
"problem"
"effeminate"
"mistakes"
"character flaws"

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Codes used in the law

Indictment, prosecution and incarceration have not been the usual path for priests and bishops who have been found to abuse minors or been discovered in other sexually compromising circumstances. Historically legal authorities have covered up sexual incidents, often using code words in their records.

In 1967, in the Tucson, diocese Monsignor Oliver was arrested consequent to picking up a 15-year-old hitchhiker, driving him to his (the cleric's) parent's home, forcing alcohol on him, and attempting to rape him. The boy escaped from the house screaming (breaking some furniture in the process) and roused a neighbor. When the police came at 1:30 A.M. they found the boy confused and distraught lying on the floor of the neighbor's home. The police traced the priest's identity through his parent's home.

What happened? The Police handled it: "by filing a secret information with the Court." They determined: "more harm than good could be done by prosecution." The Police discounted the idea that the Msgr. might be an "active or latent homosexual" but that he could be "under severe strain" with "apparent intoxication."

In 1987 Bishop Louis Gelineau was arrested for sexual solicitation at a truck stop in Massachusetts. The arresting officer, a devout Catholic, did not discover that the man was a bishop until after he had written the citation. The officer and his superior were concerned about the possible adverse consequences. The officer of the State Police in charge called the Catholic Chaplin and had him drive the bishop home to Providence, Rhode Island.

The priest chaplain, James M. Graham, recorded the encounter and reported it to me.

The arresting officer was troubled by his part in the incident and feared scandal. He consulted Fr. Tom Doyle for assurance that he had not betrayed

the church by doing his duty. He also made a note of the incident. The outcome? Some unknown agent destroyed all police records. This event among others involving minor boys was kept secret from church and the law. Although allegations of Gelineau abusing orphans while he was a seminarian are on deposition record, they never have been made public.

Historically many priests and bishops have been sent for treatment to Catholic hospitals under court order. These arrangements, informal or formal, often included agreements that the understanding judge would not press, or would suspend, charges if the cleric would submit to psychiatric treatment.

No statement can be clearer about the cozy cooperation between the law and religion-related psychiatric centers than that of Dr. Frank Valcour, the medical director of St. Luke's Institute when he wrote on December 10, 1992—"Because sexual behavior disorders often involve felonious acts many of our patients have been adjudicated. Some have been on probationary status others have been in treatment in lieu of jail time. Still others have been sent to treatment with us as part of a plea-bargain."

Father Gerald Fitzgerald reminded a bishop who sent a priest to Via Coeli after abusing minors in 1953, that priests were spared criminal prosecution *only* because they were clerics.

Codes in Latin

Although Latin is obscure enough to hide the meaning of a document from most modern readers, even here the urge to hide and disguise prevails.

"Stuprum" is a classic term used for centuries by the Church to indicate sodomy. Although it has a long history and was used to designate that activity with men or women it is most frequently used in church documents to indicated sex of a priest with a minor, usually a boy

In chancery documents from 1959 I found the phrase "De re turpi cum infantibus"(regarding an act of moral depravity with a child) to describe a priest in trouble. That is a pretty clear admission of the fact of child abuse, of course, meant only for clerical eyes.¹⁷

"*Crimen*" or "*Delict*" (literally church terms for crime) are other terms frequently found in church documents to cover a multitude of sins without

having to be explicit. They are a bit more vague because they are not exclusively reserved for sexual offences against children. They can, among other things, indicate abuse against adult men or women.

"*Delictus contra naturam cum eodem sexu*" (sin against nature with the same sex) is a phrase I found in records of Via Coeli to a bishop as late as 1963. Literally it could mean homosexual activity, but it is in the record of a notorious sexual abuser of boys. In 1964 the treatment center simplified the term to simply "Code 3". In a report about a candidate whose name had been submitted for consideration for ordination to the episcopacy the objection was that he had *Mulier* (women) problems.

Codes used in clerical assessments

Homosexuality has always been a major concern within the confines of Catholic seminaries and religious houses, but the word was not often used. Rather the danger of a "particular friendship" was the code watchword. (Cf. *the Catholic Encyclopedia* 1967 for the connection between PTs and homosexuality.) The Jesuit training manual articulated the rule "never two, always three" as a guideline for avoiding sexual exchanges or "sentimental attachments".

Fr. Fitzgerald, founder of the Servants of the Paraclete wrote with sympathy to the priest who had "fallen under the spell of abnormal relations" He said, however, that his house (Via Coeli in 1948) was packed with alcoholic priests and declined to accept a priest who implied a "problem with children". His stated policy in 1957 was to refuse problem cases that involved "abnormalities in sex."

The term "adverse homosexuality" was used in 1980 documents about abusing priests sent to a retreat house that billed itself as a "spiritual and psychiatric center for the treatment of priests and religious" for this condition

When the Vatican ordered an investigation of seminaries in the United States in 2006 they were straightforward and directed the Visitators to assess, among other issues, homosexual presence among faculty and students. This is of prime concern to Rome since in 1961 it ordered all seminaries and religious houses to bar all homosexually oriented men from entrance to training or promotion to ordination.

The document (2009) invented a unique new pseudo-psychological term—"transitional homosexuality". This is one way of admitting to ordination men who would otherwise be excluded by edict from becoming priests because of their former behavior.

Many codes can be seen in church correspondence about candidates for the priesthood where the words "problem" or "incident" remain undefined, but in the argot of the clerical system and future validation they were clearly related to sexual impropriety. The terms "dishonest act" and "moment of hesitation" are found in the file of a seminarian to indicate sexual difficulties and acts (Fr. Titian Miani, 2008). Subsequently as a priest he was cited for numerous sexual violations of minors.

An "entangled friendship" (1989) was noted in an evaluation of a man who eventually as a priest, got sexually involved with minors.

Bishops consistently used vague terms and the most developed code words when they communicated with each other and treatment facilities about a priest who was causing some concern over his sexual behavior. Often reference to sex with minors was simply stated as "father is having a problem." or "father is depressed" or "father is drinking too much."

Bishops knew what that meant, but in my experience the facts and details of the sexual particulars were often hidden from the treating therapist. Being "over familiar" with as vague a group as "lay people" can be found in bishops' correspondence, or it can be more specific such as, "with boys working at the parish." It means sexual activity.

"Troublesome involvements" is a label that indicates sexual activity, but usually with adult women or men. A priest considered a sexual addict, had sexual activity with many women over a forty-year period including several long-term relationships (at least 7 women recorded, one as young as 17) he fathered 4 children, and visited prostitutes, etc. After several reports to his superiors of his activity that was common knowledge, his Provincial told him to see a psychiatrist. The superior did not mention women or sex, only concern over "frequent and long lasting involvements".

On 14 September 2008 Italian Bishop Angelo Daniel used this term to "re-education" to explain why he sent a priest found in bed with a man's wife to

another parish assignment. The press quoted the bishop who said he could not hold this “one” failure against a priest who had done good work—as if this were an act and not a habit.

Fr. Fitzgerald termed priests who had a problem with children as men “who have fallen under the spell of abnormal relations.

In 1957 Bishop Buddy of San Diego sent a priest to Via Coeli who had abused several minor girls with the description that he had made some “mistakes” that were so well known he would be ineffective in his diocese. He went on to say that if the priest learned “discretion” he could be very useful to another bishop.

“Father is in an uncomfortable situation” or “caught up in unacceptable behavior patterns” or has been involved in some “unfortunate incidents” are all code phrases that indicate sexual activity or misbehavior. I have found all in communications from bishops and superiors referring priests to treatment facilities.

As programs for sexual treatment proliferated from 1946 onward the bishops echoed more psychologically sophisticated terms when they sent priests for treatment. These included the codes such as “boundary violations” and “adjustment problem” and “inappropriate association with a minor”

Codes and the public discourse

The media coverage of high profile abuse cases has made the reporting of clergy behavior clearer and more direct: it is not uncommon to read that the priest “abused” a child or adolescent. However confusion still arises. The press frequently uses the word pedophilia imprecisely when it designates sex with an adolescent. Also “touching” and “abuse” are terms often used to designate behavior that more accurately could be termed rape.

Imprecise as they may be, media reports have provoked public outrage that has, in turn, forced many bishops to make public statements. Here again, however, they have difficulty speaking forthrightly. They often apologize, not for the crimes committed by priests or their lack of supervision, but for the “suffering of the victims”; often, too, they try to soften the impact of events by referring to “misunderstandings” and they make excuses for priests, saying they are “exhausted” or “under severe strain.”

As recently as 2003 bishops announced that a priest was leaving the parish for reasons of health or for a sabbatical. Both were sexual offenders.

Some priests and bishops who have recently been described as "retired for medical reasons" or "overworked" were, in fact, being treated for their sexual activity. Of course, the fact that some priests and bishops leave their posts because they are genuinely ill, overworked, and need to retire causes confusion and injustice.

In a personal account, Fr. Robert Van Handel, O.F.M. of Sant Barbara who molested at least seventeen young boys between 8 and 11 years old, described his own sexual encounter with an older Franciscan priest while was in seminary high-school. The priest molested him while he was in the infirmary. His own pattern of abusing boys progressed in a manner typical of priest abusers: he developed an attraction to boys of similar age to his abuse; he progressed from reading about sex with boys to taking pictures of young boys and finally, when he took over directing a boys' choir, he started abusing boys. The manner of the seduction and abuse is also common of priest abuse. "We used to wrestle, and I would tickle him, while paying special attention to touching his genitals. (The boys) never seemed to mind, and I wasn't about to stop on my own."

Bishops have had a good deal to say about priests and bishops who abuse minors. "Pedophile clergy were afflicted—not sinful"²¹. Priests who abused "Had made some errors in judgment"²². Using the excuse that everyone sins, some bishops bypass that fact of criminality and the harm done to victims to assert "Sinners deserve forgiveness." "It (abuse) is in the past." "The statute of limitations has run out." This attitude of bishops discounts the real nature of abuse by clergy and the destruction it imposes.

Remarkably, nicknames of seminarians, priests, and bishops bandied around within clerical circles often offer an insight into problems and the sexual tone of the person in question and the institution. "Peaches" (Bishop Larocque) "Bubbles" (Cardinal Spellman) "Mother" & "Lola" (specific superiors) and "Lady Wakefield" (Cardinal Baum) "Uncle Ted" (Cardinal McCarrick) are all monikers that have been recorded within the clerical culture about superiors who priests cited as gay, sexually active, or permissive. Sometimes nicknames filter into the seminary records and are flags for deviant behaviors.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most remarkable aspects of the code word system used to obscure sexual abuse in the Church have been its reach and its consistency. Historically this language has been practiced around the world and its has been adopted by others -- police, judges, medical professionals -- who had to deal with the problem of clergy who commit sexual offenses. Fortunately, for those of us who seek to study the problem, this consistency is also key to understanding.

The glossary presented here alerts us to some of the most commonly use terms but also reveals a pattern. It cautions us to react with skepticism every time we run across a seemingly bland word or shaded phrase where we would normally expect a document to offer direct information. In the records related to sexual abuse and the Church, the shadows call on us to shine a light.
