

Remove the Plank, or Walk It: The challenge to Roman Catholic hierarchy regarding clergy sexual misconduct against adults

With the upcoming [Australian Catholics Bishops Conference](#) and the proposed [synod in 2020](#), there is a challenge that if not faced up to now, will prove to be a fatal flaw for the current church hierarchy.

As distasteful as it may be, having now been dragged through the public square of the Royal Commission, the Catholic Church must face perhaps an even greater sex scandal, greater in numbers at least – the sexual activity of the clergy at all levels with adults. Such sexual activity may be perceived in many ways. It may be seen as deeply human and spiritual expressions of love between the sexual celibate and an understanding other; ‘mistakes’ or ‘experiments’ on the noble journey to celibacy; the expected repercussions of cruel mandatory celibacy; a ‘chosen lifestyle’ particularly convenient for gay men (and sometimes women) who use their Church as both a mask, and a home base; outright criminal sexual assault; professional sexual misconduct; or spiritual and/or power abuse using sex. Regardless of what form it takes, clergy sexual activity with adults is as much a norm as an aberration, because celibacy is as much an ideal rather than reality.

One reason Catholics found the reality of child sexual abuse such a difficult pill to swallow was because for decades its reality was kept secreted away to avoid scandal. Canonical prohibitions, cover-ups, media boycott threats, and even inter-cleric blackmail ensured that the public never heard of clergy sexual activity in any form. Even if there were suspicions, few had the language with which to name and discuss, for example “priests raping nuns, priests living with paramours, priests masturbating regularly, priests dying of AIDS, priests sodomizing children, priests soothing their loneliness in the arms of beloved women or men.” ([Frawley-O’Dea 2004](#), 133-134), and not just ‘priests’ but Bishops, Religious brothers and sisters as well. Furthermore, the act of finding words, of developing a vocabulary, had been prohibited for so long. But then came the sexual revolution and Vatican II, not to mention a less ‘frightened’ media.

In 1992, psychologist to clergy, Sheila Murphy wrote a little known book titled “[A Delicate Dance: Sexuality, Celibacy and Relationships Among Catholic Clergy and Religious](#)”. The introduction was written by Donald Goergen of “[The Sexual Celibate](#)” fame. One of the conclusions Murphy reached from the stories of her 236 female, and 97 male clergy/Religious participants was that the sexual revolution of the 60s, along with the ‘window opening’ of Vatican II, did play a part in the spiking of clergy sexual activity and abuse in the 70s and 80s, particularly that involving adults. The sexual revolution and Vatican II was a release from ‘parental control’ resulting, for many, in the sudden emergence of full-blown psychological adolescence with all its risk taking, uninhibited experimentation and lack of fully developed sense of responsibility. As a result of the social and ecclesiastical revolution of the 60s, many clergy with little previous inner scaffolding, either slid into adolescent liberalism, or, collapsing under new adult demands of freedom, retreated into reactionary conservatism. Others grew up and moved on, into new ways of being ‘celibate’. However, clergy misconduct is found in all three groups.

In every graph portraying sexual abuse that I’ve seen, there is an undoubted spike in the 70s and 80s. There are many obvious statistic-based and common sense, age-related reasons for

this spike. However, if the reality of the sexual revolution and Vatican II is completely dismissed, especially out of some bubble-group-think fear of being perceived as ‘conservative’, ‘homophobic’, ‘puritanical’ or even lacking in compassion, then we are not being rational, nor accurate about this issue. One cannot blithely rule out the reality that society, including the church, underwent a sexual ‘diaspora’ from centuries of centralist strangulating control and policing of sexuality. As such severe pendulum-swing-escapes from the previous restrictions could only be expected. But what did we escape into?

According to the gospel of sexual revolutionaries “freedom from sexual hang-ups was the answer to all society’s ills... good sex would lead to instant intimacy; good sex would alleviate loneliness; good sex would eliminate interpersonal tensions” (Murphy 1992, 56). How could this new social psychology, supported by such secular saints of sexual liberty as Kinsey and Masters and Johnston, not be attractive to many Catholics who had suffered under the severe repressions of Victorian and Vatican sexuality. The issue is that even though the revolution was needed, the dominant reaction was one of adolescent abandon, not mature adult integration. As such, the many forever-adolescent clergy at the time fell also in to the outstretched arms of the emotional promises of sexual promiscuity, laced strongly with sexualised spirituality, or spiritualised sexuality, propelled by a ‘love and then do as you please’ mantra, because, after all, ‘God is love’.

Sadly, [according to victims/survivors](#) of clergy sexual misconduct, this new unintegrated liberal mantra too often also became the major ‘pickup’ line that many a misconducting cleric used as a grooming weapon, or, as a way of justifying their sexual experimenting. But... and here is the crux: What the Church and almost everyone has up to this point ignored, is that for every sexually active cleric there was and is another person involved, or victimised, and these real women and men have been, too often, cast aside as the mere collateral damage, or ‘mistakes’ of clergy on their journey to, or indeed, rejection of celibacy. These men’s and women’s versions of what occurred are rarely, if ever included, let alone validated, in discussions on the sexual activity of clergy.

If the bishops have now been forced by royal commissions and media exposure to deal with the reality of clergy child abuse, but now ignore that of adult abuse, they will be walking the plank, rather than removing it. Yes, removing the plank may also reveal to themselves that they too, perhaps ‘made a mistake’ somewhere on their journey to celibacy. Regardless, unless the Church - its hierarchy, clergy and Religious, conservative and liberal, gay and straight, and what’s left of the laity - spends some effort now to remove the plank in its own collective eye, any attempt to be a leader regarding sexual morality will be more like assaulting people. Why? People will be approached by ‘moral leaders’ with great big dangerous planks protruding out in front of them, looking quite weird, and causing even more damage. And if they/we won’t remove our plank, society may just turn around and make us walk it – it’s happened before.



Stephen de Weger is a PhD candidate at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Australia. His research will be an exploration of the underlying beliefs that influence both the lack of reporting, and, the responses of the Church to victims who do report. He is hoping to include the insights of both victims/survivors, and of the broader clergy. His contact email is stephen.deweger@qut.edu.au

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