

SEX & ABUSE BY CATHOLIC CLERGY

Plenary Session July 27, 2013 3:00—4:15

SIPE ON THE PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

PAST: Putting sexual abuse in perspective.

Sexual abuse of minors is not a recent phenomenon; the reality of clergy sexual activity has existed, as long as there have been priests and bishops.

Church documents from the earliest centuries record the ideal of religious celibacy and its violations. (Cf. *Doyle, Sipe & Wall 2006*)

There is an element of basic asceticism in the practice of religious celibacy—the imitation of Jesus in having nothing: not a place “to lay his head”; poverty by choice; and forsaking all-family relationships in order to be like Jesus. Treating others as Jesus did was the object of the discipline.

This ideal was found especially in the earliest monks of the desert.

But the other side of the coin is the corruption of the ideal. In our time, publicity about abuse has refocused our knowledge of the frequency of sexual violations by clergy and the horrendous and long lasting damage done to victims.

Purity was thought to be the source of clerical power.

Sexual abuse of minors does not stand alone within clerical culture. It is a symptom—and always has been—of a corrupt system of double lives and duplicity that reaches from local parishes to the Vatican; it destroys the myth of clerical purity.

The whole idea that clergy practice celibacy has imploded.

Celibate practice of clerics (even the appearance of it) gave early Christians considerable power. The early institution attempted to “bottle” this element of power as early as the 4th Century. (Cf. Council of Elvira 309 C.E.) That earliest council record dealt explicitly with many sexual aberrations of the clergy. By the way, records of the Desert Fathers also include accounts of their sexual struggles including some accounts of violations of minors by “holy” men.

The institution wrestled for centuries to **control its clergy and its property**. This process of consolidating power—political, religious and temporal—was furthered by three medieval church maneuvers:

- 1.) In **1049** C.E. St. Peter Damian wrote to Pope Leo IX and decried the prevalence of sexual abuse by clergy that he called “criminal vice” and said it was epidemic. (Letter 31) Even then he encouraged the pope to have zero tolerance and have offending priests reduced to the lay state. The pope was more tolerant and thought that was too stringent and said steps should be taken only if the behavior was persistent.
- 2.) Mandating in **1139** C.E. (1074) that all men ordained to the Roman priesthood had to make a prior promise of “perfect and perpetual chastity that involved celibacy, (non marriage). The rule was never very successful. Deprived of a chance to marry a majority of the clergy continued to have sexual companions. [Even in the 1960s Jesuit sociologist Joseph Fichter estimated that 30% of priests in Germany were living intimately with women.] Although statistics are hard to come by sophisticated estimates from scholars around the world do not support a vigorous practice of celibacy, from cardinals to parish priests.
- 3.) In **1215** C.E. The IV Lateran Council proclaimed that everyone

had to confess his/her mortal sins to a priest in the private and personal sacrament of penance at least once a year. Every sexual thought word desire and action constituted a mortal sin according to church teaching. We were all taught this in grade school.

Control by guilt and shame forms powerful and destructive shackles for priests and people. The chasm between the law imposed by Vatican decree and the practice of the clergy renders the teaching unbelievable. Essentially the priest is touted as another Christ (Cf. statement from IV Lateran) ...

"Confession is the only ordinary way to receive the forgiveness of God for serious (mortal) sins, which if unforgiven, condemn a person to Hell. The Church teaches that Catholic priests have been given the authority by God to exercise the forgiveness of sins here on earth and it is in God's name by which the person confessing is forgiven. In theological terms, the priest acts in persona Christi and receives from the Church the power of jurisdiction over the penitent."

The reason I point out these dates is to show how the church tried to expand its control over human sexuality in priests and people, at the same time it countenanced corruption and constructed structures that were dangerous under the guise of pastoral care.

Personal confession was and is a precarious site for domination and potential sexual abuse of the vulnerable. I wish that I had kept a record of the number of cases in which confession was the occasion for a violating cleric to target his victim.

PRESENT: Abuse knows no social, economic, ethnic or religious boundaries. You are one important voice among many suffering to

be heard and healed; crying not only for your own torturous experiences but to support and protect children and the vulnerable to prevent them from the trauma you know only too well.

The work that abuse survivors, their supporters, lawyers, and press do is tremendously valuable beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

Your witness is now taken seriously. The clergy victim/survivors movement contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of minor abuse in every other cultural system from the family to colleges to the military and beyond the U.S. This makes you valuable.

You are real. You are telling the forbidden truth.

Sexual abuse and cover-up is central to clerical culture and its inherent narcissism. The future cannot sustain a culture that effectively:

- hates women,
- imposes impossible and irrational sexual standards
- extolls itself as unerring.

Sex is the core problematic issue for religion in our time. The sexual agenda that trips up the church was defined by Wm. Shea already in 1986: *"family life, divorce & remarriage, premarital & extra marital sex, birth control, abortion, homosexuality (same-sex marriage), masturbation, women in ministry (& their ordination to the priesthood) & the male monopoly on power."*

This morass requires not a simple tweak, but a Copernican shift to address it. The basis on which the institution of the church builds its sexual is false. We must be part of the solution.

FUTURE. What is a vision for the future? Pope Francis has already said that "Ecclesiastical Narcissism" is one of the fundamental sources of the current corruption in the church.

He said that four days before his election as pope in an address to the cardinals. He is correct in identifying it as the Church's fundamental illness. Certainly narcissism—self-interest—is at the root of abuse of the vulnerable and the pattern and practice of covering up violations to preserve image and money.

Certainly ecclesiastical agencies and power have not been proactive but strongly resistant to coming to grips with the crisis of clerical abuse. Every action they have taken has been reactive and largely continues in every possible way.

We can divorce ourselves from the institutional church all we want, but we cannot shake our own narcissism so easily. We need to support honest and reform anywhere we find it.

AU Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's voice is worth hearing and his call for a Council is brave and prophetic. Rare in the hierarchy.

The Capuchins of Milwaukee have been unique and bold in their efforts to review the records of all their personnel.

Our own integrity is our primary concern and responsibility. But integrity does exist even in the midst of corruption. Seek, find, and support the reformation of an institution that is sexually and financially distorted. Truth will out.

BREAKOUT—Saturday July 27, 2013 4:30-5:30

SPIRITUALITY BEYOND TRAUMA

The long-term adverse effects of early trauma are physical/medical, psychological and spiritual. (cf. *ACE Study*-adverse childhood events) As you know those effects can be dire.

Sexual trauma or betrayal by a clergy person often leaves deep scars that sometimes necessarily involve the rejection of the structure of any church and hierarchy. (23.9 % of Americans raised as Roman Catholic no longer claim this as their faith. One in five Americans claim “none” as their religious preference. Cf *Pew Forum on Religion*.)

No one can fault anyone for rejecting Catholicism. Collateral victims—family, friends, advocates and many Roman Catholic lawyers—have testified: “I can no longer believe in the Catholic Church.”

The moral credibility of the institution has been so deeply compromised that it is empty. An institution that cannot tell the truth about itself has nothing to say.

Individuals of integrity exist (they are not generally the hierarchy of the Church).

But the need for non-clerical spirituality continues and can be found.

We can exist without a church, without rules and without dogmas.

We cannot exist without spirituality. One of the great leaders of the 20th Century said: “We must find some spiritual basis for living, else we die.” (Bill W)

This discussion will explore ways of healing and fulfillment that go beyond institutions and clerical control.

STEPS TO A SPIRITUALITY

- We need powers beyond ourselves. Awareness that we are not spiritually self-sufficient is essential to a spiritual life.
- It takes daily attention in mindfulness or meditation.
- Honesty is necessary for any spirituality.
- Empathy, gratitude and forgiveness are also required.
- A system or group of like-minded people may be helpful. The 12 steps demonstrated by AA is one of the most profound spiritual programs ever devised.
- Spirituality is beyond rules and dogmas. It is an internal process that will demonstrate itself to others on the outside.

St. Augustine in his confessions articulates the core of his personal spirituality: It is an internal relationship that is not institutionally confined: *Late have I loved you, Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within, but I*

was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things that you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace. (St. Augustine, Confessions)

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