



**Award-winning
film "Spotlight":
An interview with
Richard Sipe**

Interchange readers who saw the Academy Award-winning film "Spotlight" (concerning the investigation by the *Boston Globe's* Spotlight team into clerical sex abuse in

the Archdiocese of Boston) might not have realized that only a few degrees of separation stand between them (via Maryknoll) and the expert consultant featured in phone calls during the film: A.W. Richard Sipe. For Richard is the husband of former Maryknoll Sister Marianne Benkert (Sr. Grace Margaret).

Tapping into this Maryknoll connection, I recently talked with Richard about his role in the film and about the sensitive but critical issues "Spotlight" brought to the screen.

First, some Wikipedia-like background information about Richard and his life's work: A.W. Richard Sipe (born December 11, 1932, in Robbinsdale, Minn.) is a former Benedictine monk-priest of eighteen years, a sociologist, and author of six books about Catholicism and sexual abuse issues in the Roman Catholic Church. He is an American Certified clinical mental health counselor trained specifically to deal with the mental health problems of Catholic priests. He has practiced psychotherapy

and has taught on the faculties of major Catholic seminaries and colleges, lectured in medical schools, and served as a consultant and expert witness in both civil and criminal cases involving the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests. During his training and therapies, he conducted a



Richard Sipe and Pope John Paul II after an international conference on celibacy at the Vatican, May 1993

25-year ethnographic study (published in 1990) about the sexual behavior of supposed celibates in which he found more than half were involved in sexual relationships. In 1970, after leaving the priesthood, Richard married Marianne Benkert, a psychiatrist who has served as past president of the Baltimore County Medical Association and chair of the Ethical and Judicial Affairs Council of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland and in UC San Diego's psychiatry residency training program. (Together with Fr. Thomas P. Doyle, Marianne wrote "Religious Duress and Its Impact on Clergy Abuse Victims.")

Richard has been a witness in more than fifty-seven lawsuits, testifying on behalf of victims of childhood sexual abuse by Catholic priests. His research and his book *Sex, Priests and Power* are specifically referenced in "Spotlight" as being crucial in the story of the *Boston Globe's* Pulitzer-Prize-winning 2002 investigation of predatory priests and the decades-long cover-up of the crimes of such priests by the Archdiocese of Boston. The 1995 book is shown on screen in its bright red-covered hardback edition when the investigative team meets their first victim, Phil Saviano, the founder of the New England chapter of SNAP (Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests). As a favor to the film's director Tom McCarthy, actor Richard Jenkins performed un-credited as Richard's voice in three phone calls in the film, each based on real-life conversations with the *Boston Globe's* Spotlight reporters. This includes one critical conference call that proves to be a turning point in the investigation: Richard makes the metric calculation that 6 percent of priests are sex abusers, a figure that is then verified by the investigative team's subsequent research.

In the interview below, Richard devotes considerable attention to the role mandatory celibacy plays in cases of clergy sex abuse. That celibacy has been at the heart of his research is evident in the titles of just some of his published books: *A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy*; *Living the Celibate Life*; *Celibacy: A Way of Loving, Living and Serving*; and *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited*. Richard took time from his preparations for an upcoming major trial case in Pennsylvania to "sit" with me for this interview. Had we had more time together I would like to have followed up with questions beyond the celibacy issue: If child sex abuse has such a long history – a history that predates mandatory celibacy in the Catholic Church – what other factors would explain that history? Even though instances of child sex abuse may not be as numerous in other professions (football coaches and UN peacekeepers, among many recent examples) how do experts un-



"Spotlight" cast (l-r) Michael Keaton, Liev Schreiber, Mark Ruffalo, Rachael McAdams, John Slattery, and Brian d'Arcy James

derstand the causes of that abuse in the absence of mandatory celibacy?

I invite readers of *Interchange* with access to the Internet to continue probing these and other questions on the Interchange listserv. (Write to Frank Gerace to register your email address: ciccioerace@gmail.com.)

– Tom Fenton, Editor

Interview

Interchange: How did you become involved in the "Spotlight" film and what was your role?

Richard Sipe: Mike Rezendes from the Spotlight team called in 2000 when they were putting together their investigation in Boston. My book *Sex, Priests, and Power: The Anatomy of a Crisis* interested them.

IC: Were you pleased with the production? Anything more the film could have/should have done?

RS: Marianne and I have seen the movie three times – once with the actors and the Spotlight team. We feel that the movie has perfect pitch. It focused on the work reporters have to do to get at the truth – facts. A model for all of us investigating and reporting difficult, unpopular subjects. They were assiduous in ferreting out the reality of the subject. Thus they avoided any hint of salaciousness, but powerfully created a picture of complex and emotion-laden subjects.

IC: After seeing the film ourselves, Mary and I talked with friends about questions the film raised. These were on two levels: the abuse itself and the church's response to the abuse. Starting with the abuse itself, would you help us understand these issues: What's the nature of the problem? What's the particular issue we're concerned about? Pedophilia? Abuse of power in sexual relations?

RS: I do not use the term "pedophilia." That is a psychiatric designation. My studies are focused on and record behavior. Therefore "sex with a minor" is the term to use. This has significant moral implications. And it has criminal implications as well, very frequently ignored by the church. And that behavior also has psychological ramifications, for the perpetrator, certainly, but profound

effects on the victims. This behavior is rightfully called “soul murder.” This violation of the person is a betrayal of trust of the worst kind. A violation, a perversion of power.

IC: What’s the extent of the problem in general society and particularly in the church?

RS: No one knows the extent of the sexual abuse of minors. Most researchers claim it is mammoth, “too frequent to count,” but comparative ethnological studies have not yet been conducted.

In the case of the Roman Catholic church: No one can argue today against the fact that a certain proportion of Catholic priests sexually abuse minors. Whatever the number, from 4 to 6 percent to 9 or 10 percent. One study in Spain records the number of priests who involve themselves with minors at 22 percent. I studied one diocese in this country that listed 23 percent of its priests on its “Critical Case” listing.

Studies have shown that no more than 45 to 50 percent of priests and bishops are practicing celibacy at any one time. When he was faced with the conclusion of two studies in 1993, Cardinal Jose Sanchez said in a BBC TV interview, “I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of those figures.” (The BBC video was reportedly seen by 90 million viewers.)

IC: How unique is the problem in the church...particularly in the Roman Catholic church? Are ministers, priests, Sisters, Brothers all involved in equal numbers?

RS: Sex is a part of human nature. Sexual expression with minors can be said to be ubiquitous – present in all cultures. It has been recorded in multiple religions and sects. Sex of adult men with minor boys is especially common in Islamic culture where it holds a unique status of tolerance. In my estimation in Islam it merits a clear echo of the ancient Greek ideal.

Abuse of minors is not evenly spread over all Catholic religious communities. Women religious seem to offend less frequently than men; sadistic behavior appears to be more common among women. Institutions under Catholic auspices – in Ireland, Australia, America, and Canada’s First Nations – are notorious for their cruelty and abuse. Priests, Brothers, and nuns were all involved.

Not enough research has been devoted to the problem of child violation and neglect. The U.S. does keep some records, but not enough to answer all our questions.

IC: What link, if any, do you see with celibacy? Is it a cause? A factor? Would incidents of sexual abuse go down in number if celibacy were declared optional? How do we explain sexual abuse in professions and cultures where mandatory celibacy is not a factor?

RS: Mandated celibacy is without doubt one causative factor in the sexual behavior of priests and religious. Sexual deprivation does have consequences. It is not the only factor in sex with minors by clergy, but the church must treat the beam in its own eye before it turns to the

speck in other eyes.

Of all priests active in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 1983, 11.5 percent were eventually cited for child abuse. It is ludicrous to claim that that number would hold for lawyers or physicians in that time and place.

The Church’s Response

IC: Turning now to the official response to the problem in the Roman Catholic church. When and how were officials in the U.S. church made aware of the problem?

RS: My experience even to this very day is of a church that lacks empathy, basic Christian charity, and justice in its response to the reality of priest (and bishop/cardinal) criminal behavior. Victims movements, the press, and lawyers have forced whatever response there has been from the church. There have been twelve grand jury investigations of different dioceses (Boston, Philadelphia [3]) and Rockville Centre among them). Every one has concluded that church authority has acted in its own self interest to preserve “image and possessions and avoid scandal at the expense of care of souls.”

Already in 1923 the American hierarchy (in New York and Pennsylvania) were considering plans to establish special havens to treat “problem priests” (see Thomas Vernon Moore’s research). In 1946 the Archdiocese of Philadelphia set up just such a hospital in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. There are more than a dozen sites for clergy treatment now. But the church has known of this particular problem since the year 60 CE. (See Doyle, Sipe, and Wall, *Sex, Priests & Secret Codes: The Catholic Church’s 2000 Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse*.) In my personal research I have found recorded cases in the U.S. from 1917 onward. It is the dirty little clergy open secret.

IC: Anyone reading the news today would have to concede that church officials have been guilty of sweeping this issue under the rug. “Spotlight” drives home that point in dramatic style. But why do you think they re-



Marianne, Richard, and their son, Walter (1991)

sponded in this manner? Fear? Arrogance? A feeling that the church is above the law? Or that this problem is a family matter, one best resolved within the family and not in civil or criminal courts?

RS: I have found, with some amazement, attending the depositions of bishops and cardinals (and priests), how common lying is. Blatant lies despite clear contrary documented evidence. Arrogance, yes. I have seen it to a diabolical degree. I have heard bishop's words, "I only lie when I have to." My understanding is that the church's good (their own, of course) supersedes truth. Truth in the Gospel meaning has little value in the realm of the hierarchy's fight to avoid scandal and preserve its money. What comes across to me is that the church (they) are above the law – or a law unto themselves.

This is a "family of man" problem. The church has proven to be deficient in its ability to monitor and reform itself. All real action has come because of pressure from outside forces. They are still vigorously resisted by any means fair or foul. This – clergy sexual activity – is the pivotal complex issue of the crisis and twenty-first century reformation of the Church.

The scandal behind the scandal of clergy sex with minors is the reality of the sexual lives of clergy from the top of the Vatican on down.

IC: Do you feel that there's hope for change in how RC church officials deal with this issue? If so, what will cause a change for the better?

RS: Certainly the Roman Catholic Church will endure. It is, and always has been, in the process of evolution. Progress will come as women are given equal power and status in church authority. This will mean women priests and bishops.

The evolution of our religion will eliminate mandated celibacy for priesthood and accept a married priesthood. These will not happen in my lifetime, however. No matter. It is just important that we be honest men and women of our time leading to the future.

IC: Your half-century-long involvement in this disturbing issue must have taken an awful toll on you personally...and on your faith and affiliation with the church? What keeps you going?

RS: I have been involved with these issues (fights) for over fifty years and I admit that at times I get tired. In fact, I actually suffer trauma from my efforts and have found myself in bouts of deep depression. This has given me a quality of empathy for all the victims who have been victimized and often re-traumatized by a church that should have comforted and consoled them.

Courage has become my byword and *hope* my fellow traveler. Love that is of God has been with me in family and friends. This is the taste of the eternal that carries me along.