

# The Sexual Abuse Crisis is Not a Crisis



*Thomas P. Doyle is a Dominican priest, canon lawyer, addictions therapist and long-time supporter of justice and compassion for clergy sex abuse victims.*

*This article appeared in the April 3, 2019 issue of Conscience, a newsjournal of Catholic opinion published by Catholics for Choice.*

*The Executive Council of CORPUS believes it is a manifesto for reform energies in the next five years.*

The clerical leadership of the Catholic church has been aware of sexual violation of minors and vulnerable adults for centuries. This tragic reality is a critical problem, even though it has been buried in secrecy. The secrecy ended in the mid-80s, when the media exposed the church's cover-up of a prolific priest-perpetrator in Louisiana. Often referred to as a "crisis," it is, in truth, not a crisis. It is something much worse. It is a worldwide manifestation of a complex, systemic and self-destructive condition in the church. It is giving us a view of today's version of the Dark Side of the institutional church.

The hierarchy has been trying to fix what it considers a temporary problem for more than three decades with no real or lasting success. Despite the countless statements, programs, apologies, explanations and excuses provided by popes and bishops, the toxicity is still very much a part of today's church. Essential to moving towards any healing is the real acceptance by the clerical estate that the church is not limited to the clergy and those enmeshed in ecclesiastical governance, but is what Vatican II called "The People of God," of which the hierarchy is but a very small part. Much of the bumbling and even disastrous response thus far has been justified by those responsible as being "for the good of the church." "Church," however, has not meant what is best for the entire community of believers. Instead, it means what is best for the image, the reputation, the power and the financial security of the clerical elite. The persistent failure to make it all go away is akin to try-

ing to fix a hardware problem with a software solution.

The gravity of the situation is acknowledged by the civil governments of several countries. This has been driven home in the U.S. by the attorneys general of several states who have launched investigations into the dioceses in their respective jurisdictions. The revelations from the investigations here and in other countries make it quite clear that the problem is not rooted in the dysfunctional clerics who have violated countless vulnerable people. These violations are the tragic symptom of far more serious systemic deficiencies that have made it impossible for the hierarchy to fix what it sees as the problem. Even worse, the powerful influence of the celibate, clerical culture has made it impossible for those in authority to fully comprehend the horrific nature of this deeply rooted threat to the People of God. In short, this is not a crisis with a beginning and an end. The sexual abuse and the hierarchy's response are glaring symptoms of deep flaws grounded in the nature of the institutional church.

Abuse survivors and countless others the world over have insisted, quite bluntly, that the pope and the bishops stop talking and do something. To date, the hierarchy has responded to this disaster just as they have to so many other crises that have challenged the Church: by having meetings, issuing statements and then having more meetings and issuing more statements. If the problem doesn't go away, blame someone or something else.

# The Sexual Abuse Crisis is Not a Crisis

A good example of this: In his first public letter on clergy abuse, (June 11, 1993) Pope John Paul II blamed the American culture and secular journalists for treating moral evil “as an occasion for sensationalism.” Such an approach is not only useless, it makes a very bad situation worse.

The hierarchy regularly claims that because of the initiatives it has taken, there is no place safer for children and minors than the Catholic church. The reference is, of course, to the many programs and policies mandated for Catholic institutions that are supposed to provide training about sexual abuse, as well as vetting protocols to identify sexual predators. These all look to the present and the future.



While it is true that church leaders have taken these steps, it is also true that they have been forced to do everything they have done. The single most glaring deficiency is the lack of any consistent pastoral care for victims and their families. The many expressions of regret, apologies, promises of change and assurances of deep concern for the victims have no meaningful impact. They have no impact because they are not followed up by sincere attempts to reach out to victims to help identify and respond to the emotional devastation, the betrayal of trust and the profound spiritual damage inflicted not only by the sexual violation itself, but also by the history of rejection and re-victimization by the official church. Victims scoff at the sainthood of Pope John Paul II with good reason.

He not only never responded to any of the victims' pleas, he never even acknowledged them. But far worse was his protection of one of the church's worst offenders, the late Fr. Marsial Maciel DeGollado, founder of the Legion of Christ. There are many valiant priests and nuns providing very effective pastoral support, yet the church's ordained leadership simply does not know how to deal with the people whom it has been instrumental in harming. Some would say the hierarchy doesn't know how, and others argue that even if it did, it either can't or won't act.

Popes Benedict and Francis have done far more than John Paul II, but their efforts have clearly been deficient. What more is needed? What should the hierarchy do? What can the People of God do?

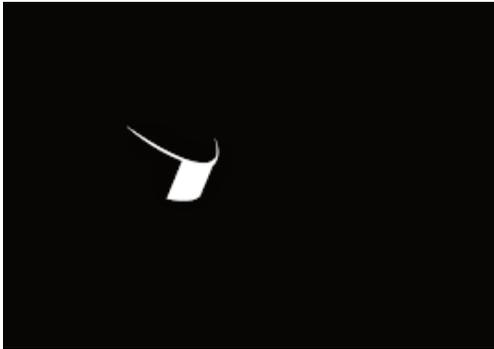
First, it is essential to acknowledge the most glaring aspects of causality. The clerical culture, or clericalism, is the most commonly identified contributor.

This is a world set apart from the rest of society. It is sustained by the toxic belief that the ordained are not only set apart from lay people but superior to them. This belief fosters the narcissism and sense of entitlement so common among clerics. It also creates a detachment from children, family and the role of intimacy in life to the extent that many clerics simply cannot comprehend the devastation parents experience when their child is sexually violated.

It creates, sustains and protects the deference that far too many clerics believe is their due. By the same token, far too many lay people continue to believe that this deference is part of their Catholic belief system. This erroneous thinking is at the root of the failure to demand accountability from the offending clerics and their superiors who protect them. Over the past three decades, the belief in clerical privilege and the related deference has not only been significantly weakened, it has also resulted in hostility towards the clergy and bishops in particular and hostility towards the church itself.

# The Sexual Abuse Crisis is Not a Crisis

Yet despite the dramatic changes in attitude towards the clerical world, the plague of clericalism is still alive and as destructive as ever, especially in certain cultures where the clergy are still protected by an alarming degree of magical thinking.



The clerical culture is protected by mandatory celibacy and the myth that it is universally practiced. This, of course, is dependent on the church's traditional teaching on human sexuality. This teaching is dysfunctional, confusing and contradictory, and it must be seriously re-examined. Close studies of countless cleric-perpetrators show many to be psychosexually dysfunctional to a serious degree. The connection between the sexual teaching and attitudes they assimilated, and their aberrant behavior must be examined. And such an examination cannot possibly be substituted by the ridiculous conclusion that the entire problem has been caused because there are homosexuals among the clergy.

The more pressing issue is recognizing the systemic roots of the church's response. This leads to the second necessary demand. "Systemic" means that there are causal factors embedded in the very nature of the church. The most glaring is the teaching on the nature of the priesthood. Countless victims have said they believed priests were closer to God, and many even believed priests took God's place. This false belief results in what many refer to as the "soul murder" of the victims of Catholic clerics.

This traditional thinking, supported by John Paul II's emphasis on the unproven theory that a man is ontologically changed at the moment of ordination, must be banished from the contem-

porary theology of the priesthood. Fifty years ago, the bishops at Vatican II fought to eliminate the public image of the "Church Triumphant" and to re-image priests and bishops not as members of a gilded aristocracy, but instead as humble pastors. This seemed to be catching on, but only for a brief moment. The Polish pontiff, much to the delight of numerous upper-level clerics, began to systematically deconstruct the post-conciliar expressions of the priesthood that placed the church's ministers with and not above the people. This trend, known as "restorationism" seeks to return to pre-Vatican practices, customs, theologies and liturgy, all of which are heavily infused with the elaborate theology of the exclusivity of Catholicism in general and the orthodox clergy and supportive laity in particular. This is toxic clericalism in action. With predator priests being outed and even convicted and jailed on an increasing basis, sustaining the hope for a return to the gilded age of glorious clericalism is hardly going to happen.

*The clerical culture is protected by mandatory celibacy and the myth that it is universally practiced.*

Nevertheless, there remain a significant number of clerics and lay people who firmly believe that once homosexual clerics and sex abusers are banished, the church will return to the security and glory of its former days. For some, homosexual clerics have become a convenient scapegoat for those too threatened to confront more systemic issues affecting the hierarchy.

The bishops run the Catholic church. The pope and his Vatican colleagues can issue decrees, laws and policy changes, but they mean little unless the bishops take them seriously. When Pope Benedict visited the United States in 2008, he directly addressed the bishops several times and bluntly told them of their duties:

# The Sexual Abuse Crisis is Not a Crisis

“Rightly, you attach priority to showing compassionate care to victims. It is your God-given responsibility as pastors to bind up the wounds caused by every breach of trust, to foster healing, to promote reconciliation and to reach out with loving concern to those seriously wronged.”

He made these remarks to the U.S. bishops on April 16, 2008. The day before, during his flight to the US, he also said quite bluntly,

“We will absolutely exclude pedophiles from the sacred ministry. It is incompatible. Whoever is guilty of being a pedophile cannot be a priest.”

It is safe to assume that in using the term “pedophile,” the pope was not speaking in the clinical sense, that is, referring to clerics who sexually violate pre-pubescent children, but rather to those who violate minors.

Pope Benedict gave the bishops a direct order to provide compassionate pastoral care to victims, an order mostly ignored to date. Yet pastoral care has been generously extended by the non-ordained members of the church and by those brave clerics who care more about Christ than career.

To Benedict’s words, add those of Pope Francis. Both pontiffs echo the theme of the bishops’ collective and individual obligation to reach out with loving concern to those harmed. These and similar papal admonitions, which certainly look like direct orders, have remained empty words, never seriously followed by the bishops because to do so poses too great a threat to the hierarchy’s top and really only priority: the security of the episcopal image and power and the neutralization of any threat to what is left of it. This speaks directly to the third essential demand, which concerns the office of bishops and the nature of the institutional church. Sexual abuse by clerics was a deep secret protected at all costs until the secular media set aside their deference for “the church” in favor of reporting truth.

The bishops believed—and rightly so—that public knowledge of the extent of clergy abuse would cause scandal among the faithful, whom they wrongly believed could not handle it. The true scandal did not arise from the sexual violation of children and adults.

The real scandal came from the bishops themselves through their efforts to hide the problem, then lie about it and finally try to shift the blame to any person, idea or practice they hoped it would stick to.

*Sexual abuse by clerics was a deep secret protected at all costs until the secular media set aside their deference for “the church” in favor of reporting truth.*

The third essential demand necessitates the deconstruction of the institutional church as a hierarchical system, given by God to Saint Peter and through which Catholics must pass to attain salvation. This construct depends on the bishops as the pillars of the church insofar as the church rests on them as successors of the original apostles. Protecting the church is the primary value, and by “church” is meant the bishops and their governmental system. Christ’s promise in Matthew 18:6 to those who cause one of his little ones to stumble has never been taken seriously.

This step poses a massive threat to the entire hierarchy and to those whose lives and futures are intertwined with upward mobility on the hierarchical ladder. It obviously entails the dissolution of the counterproductive distinction between lay persons and clerics, a distinction that sustains the clerical subculture because it supports the deeply entrenched myth that

# The Sexual Abuse Crisis is Not a Crisis

clerics, simply because of ordination, are automatically superior to lay people. Even this attitude runs into a fundamental threat from a Gospel passage that easily proves its hypocrisy: Matthew 19: “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.”

The persistent teaching on the sacred nature of the institutional church and the clerical elite has provided abusive clerics easier access to potential victims. The belief in practice has meant that it is far worse to question or doubt a rapist who happened to be a cleric than it is to fight him off. Countless clerics took advantage of the false mythology surrounding priests by threatening their victims with God’s wrath should they reveal their “secret.” Some even assured victims this wrath would extend to their parents and loved ones. Far too many innocent victims were burdened with the irrational belief that the sexual assault was their fault, because “priests don’t sin.”

None of this would be possible if the common understanding of the priesthood, of priestly ministry and of the institutional church shook loose the triumphalistic and magical thinking and replaced it with a re-imagined priesthood, church leadership and the church itself in the context of Christ’s words about the community of believers.

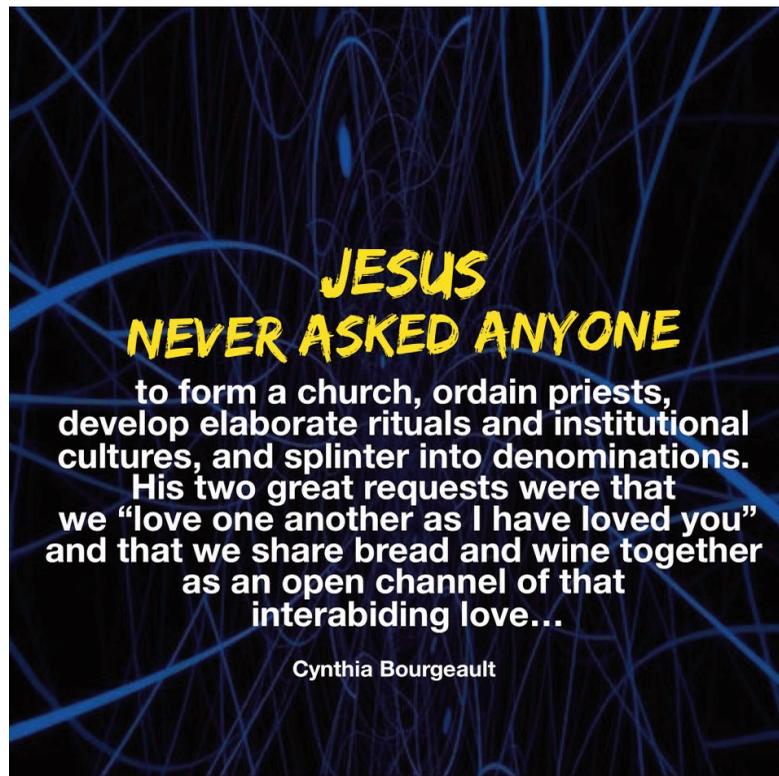
These fundamental structural and attitudinal changes are essential, or the clergy abuse nightmare and others like it will keep recurring. People ask when it will be over because they hardly believe the bishops whose assurances have thus far fallen flat.

It will be over when the system that created it loses its power. It will be over when the natural, unquestioned tendency of every cleric and lay Catholic, when informed of an incident of sexual abuse, thinks only of the impact on and welfare of the victim and his or her family.

These essential moves are part of a paradigmatic change, and that is dependent more on unfolding history than on verbalized

demands. In the meantime, there exists a very real problem that has done unspeakable damage to countless innocent victims, their families, their friends and the people of God in general. The Holy See and the bishops have faced numerous suggestions and even demands for effective action. What they have done over the years has been only marginally effective, so it is time to consider

more radical steps. In this regard, I wish to refer to the words of Marie Collins of Ireland. Collins is one of the wisest and most articulate voices for survivors. She served on the Papal Commission for the Protection of Children until she resigned because of the Vatican bureaucracy’s failure to avoid the temptation to interfere. She is also highly experienced and exceptionally courageous. Collins recently offered seven basic steps that need to be addressed at the upcoming papal convocation, if it hopes to have any lasting credibility.

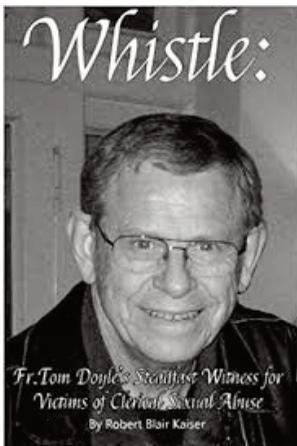


# The Sexual Abuse Crisis is Not a Crisis

The first condition impacts all others: Stop talking and do something! We have heard everything you have to say many times over. It changed nothing in the past and will change nothing now. Doing something is another matter:

1. Agree on a universal definition of child abuse with worldwide accountability.
2. Create a universal definition of zero tolerance and then apply it worldwide.
3. Change canon law so that it contains a realistic definition and narrative about sexual abuse of vulnerable adults.
4. Enact universal safeguarding standards to which every bishop will be held accountable.
5. Demand that every bishop commits in writing that he will abide by these standards.
6. Enact a universal set of action steps and practical plans to face abuse, which is criminal behavior, and every bishop must be held strictly accountable for enforcing this policy.
7. Effectively respond to clergy abuse, independent of involvement or interference by the Vatican bureaucracy.

The age-old presence of sexual violation by clerics is not a problem from outside the church. It is a terrible manifestation of serious deficiencies in aspects of the church that Catholics have come to believe are unchangeable because of their very nature. Yet Catholics, and especially clerics, must ask themselves if the terrible harm visited on God's people because of these deficiencies can possibly justify behavior that Christ condemned. The community of believers is grounded in belief and faith in Jesus Christ, not in a man-made political construct the security of which depends on anti-Christian behavior.



This book, written by Robert Blaire Kaiser, is the first truly insider account of the Vatican's ongoing U.S. strategy since 1985 for priest child abuse cover ups, a timely reminder as the popular pope plans to begin his diversionary U.S. and U.N. public relations tour in September. Fr. Thomas Doyle, a Dominican priest in good standing, was there at the outset working from 1981 to 1986 behind closed doors as a canon lawyer for the Vatican's U.S. ambassador, Pio Laghi.

Laghi, as this bold and revealing book reports, was then in 1985 a central figure, along with Pope John Paul II, Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law and Philadelphia's Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua and others, in the formation of the US bishops' continuous cover up strategy that protected child rapists.

For their obedience, apparently, John Paul II rewarded Laghi by making him cardinal in 1991 and Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis) by making him a bishop in 1992, unusual for a Jesuit. Tom Doyle, on the other hand, for being honest and brave on behalf of defenseless children, was exiled and harassed as a military chaplain, but kept on battling for children and survivors for over a quarter century, with considerable success. This very moving and fast paced book tells Doyle's inspiring and indomitable story.

(review on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))