

THE PHENOMENON OF SYSTEMIC SEXUAL VIOLATION BY CATHOLIC CLERICS AND RELIGIOUS:



Thomas Doyle, a Dominican priest, was one of the first people in the Catholic church to bring attention to sexual abuse by clergy. In 1985, Doyle authored a report on medical and legal issues raised by pedophilia in the priesthood. He "warned of a national scandal if the hierarchy did not adopt a sound policy."

Doyle is a columnist for the NCR. His work with clergy abuse survivors has been featured in the documentaries Holy Water-Gate: Abuse Cover-up in the Catholic Church, Deliver Us From Evil, Alex Gibney's Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God, in Robert Kaiser's book Whistle: Fr. Doyle's Steadfast Witness for Victims of Clerical Abuse.

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND THE TOMORROWS

Yesterday

The contemporary surge in attention given the phenomenon of sexual violation of the vulnerable by Catholic clerics and religious is due in large part to two unique and history making events: the laicization and banishment of former Cardinal Ted McCarrick and the publication of the extensive report of the Grand Jury of the State of Pennsylvania, which, contrary to the opinion of one well-known journalist, is not "grossly misleading, irresponsible, inaccurate and unjust."

Sexual violation by clerics and religious of all ranks and both genders has existed in the institutional Church throughout its history. The oldest prohibition against sex between adult men and young boys is found in the Didache which dates from the end of the first century, a time when the Church was not an institution but a loosely organized body of believers. The latest in this two-thousand-year series is Pope Francis' norms for dealing with accused bishops, contained in Vos estis lux mundi, issued on May 7th of this year. In between there are several hundred official documents on the matter issued by popes or gatherings of bishops.

This phenomenon is not a crisis, a problem or a temporary historical aberration. What began in our era, in 1983 and 1984, with a few cases from dioceses in Louisiana, Minnesota and Rhode Island, has gradually emerged as a horrific reality that no longer

is hidden but has been exposed in Catholic communities throughout the world. John Paul II's early attempts to blame the American Church and then the English-speaking Churches would be seen as simply ludicrous if they did not mask an active denial that only succeeded in enabling the bishops and fueling the intense adversarial nature of the ever-increasing reality.

Today We are in the midst of the process of the revelation of the tragic and destructive dark side of the institutional Church. I am not referring to what I consider an irrelevant cop-out by those who blame it all on the influence of Satan. Some have compared this phenomenon to the state of the Church that produced the Reformation but in truth it is far worse. In spite of some attempts to explain it by pointing to a rejection of traditional moral theology or the fallout from the social and sexual turbulence of the sixties, these theories and others like them are only very weak distractions. The existence of the sexual abuse plague is evidence of a profound contradiction that reaches to the foundational core of the institutional Church.

The contradiction: The Church, described as the Mystical Body of Christ, the People of God, the source of our earthly happiness and our hope for eternal life, has given its people one of history's most stringent and restrictive codes of sexual conduct and taught them that even slight violations can result in eternal damnation.

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At the same time those who have taught and enforced this path to God's favor have committed and systemically enabled the commission of acts against the most vulnerable in our midst that are deemed by most if not all societies as the most horrific and disgusting that can be perpetrated on another human being. This horror is compounded when we realize that the damage inflicted on the victims surpasses the harm done to the body and the emotions. It is a profound spiritual damage that can only be described as the murder of the soul.

This is the contradiction we must live with. It is a chasm between the ideals of the Christian life and the betrayal of these ideals by those whom we have been taught to believe are Christ's visible ministers to us. If we step back and ponder the totality of what we have before us it defies description and comprehension.



Since 1983 the dynamic of this dark epidemic has radically changed. The length, breadth and depth has slowly and painfully unfolded from being covered by a thick blanket of industrial strength secrecy to a scandalous dimension of the Church that defies every Christian principle. Although popes and bishops have asked the lay members to fast, do penance and pray for forgiveness, these entreaties are clearly misplaced because those who have opened the gates to the dark side have been the bishops, not the laity. Over the past thirty years there have been dozens of studies and reports and the common element of causality has been the role of the bishops and the inadequacy of their response.

The hierarchy's' collective efforts, and here I not only include but highlight the former bishop of Rome, John Paul II, to deny, minimize and shift the blame and the cause have failed. Parallel to the steady and ever more horrifying stories of violation and hierarchical mendacity have been the fumbling attempts of the institutional Church to figure out just how to manage this nightmare. In every other era, when the scourge of sexual violation has managed to surface in the life of the Church, it has been the popes and bishops who have controlled the attempts to cope with it and they have done so exclusively by means of discipline

of the offending clerics or monks. Today the situation is far, far different.

The hierarchy's attempts at control have failed. Almost from the

very beginning the victims have realized that waiting for the institutional Church to respond to them in a compassionate, supportive way and to look at itself to try to find realistic explanations was a waste of time. Unlike any other destructive challenge the institutional Church has faced, the victims and the laity have emerged as the leaders and as the force for both enlightenment and change.

The scourge of sexual violation and its systemic enabling, coverup and complex web of untruths has revealed a harsh reality that has afflicted the People of God for centuries:

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- a. Sexual violation and other forms of corruption are deeply entrenched in the clerical culture, a culture that protects the clerics rather than the victims.
- b. The constant obsession of the hierarchy with protecting its image, stature and power at the expense of the victims has had the opposite effect and has, in fact, produced an erosion of respect and trust.
- c. This reality has revealed a much different “Church” than that of *Lumen Gentium*, the Catechism or the Code of Canon Law. Contrast the soaring, mystical rhetoric of *Lumen Gentium* or *Mystici Corporis* with the undeniable behavior of the institution over the past three decades.
- d. The history of sexual abuse, denial and coverup has been embedded in the clerical culture that not only protected but enabled it and this culture is no longer capable of hiding, controlling, minimizing or eradicating it. Nor is it capable of continuing to sustain the myth of clerical superiority based on magical thinking about the nature of sacred orders.

This complex phenomenon is far more than the physical violation of minors by clerics and the fumbling response of Church leadership.

People on all levels of the institutional Church have by now realized that this phenomenon is profoundly destructive and toxic. It is also prophetic in a schizophrenic way. There have been multiple efforts at explaining, understanding and reacting to it. Some are constructive and worthwhile and others are non-sensical fluff....but as yet there has been no organized and Church-supported effort to take the risk of fearlessly looking into and peeling back the many layers of causality that are at the bottom of these essential questions:

- a. Why has the institutional Church attracted a significant number of men who are emotionally and sexually immature and often psychosexually disturbed and what has the clerical culture done to enable this condition?
- b. Why have the ordained “pastors” been incapable of comprehending the profound depth of spiritual damage done to the victims, their loved ones and the entire Christian community and equally incapable of finding effective paths to healing.
- c. Why has there been such obsessive concern for the welfare of the clerical caste and why has there been an inability to recognize that those violated are also the “Church.”

In spite of the seemingly non-stop assurances of a new age of individual and institutional honesty, the current phrase is transparency, there are far too many members of the hierarchy who persist in acting in a contradictory manner by treating victims and survivors as things and not people and by resisting the efforts of both law enforcement and government judicial agencies from uncovering the full extent of the hierarchy’s responsibility. One does not have to look far for examples:

- a. The failure of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Children due primarily to the subversive actions of some members of the Vatican curia.
- b. The obstructionist tactics of numerous bishops and their attorneys and their unwillingness to cooperate with State attorneys general, e.g., the bishops of Colorado, California and Missouri.
- c. The destructive actions of bishops and their attorneys towards many victims who have chosen to seek relief in the civil courts

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d. The creation of campaigns to block any type of legislative reform that would benefit all victims by the expenditure of millions of dollars to hire lobbyists and by the spread of nonsensical propaganda that this is all a campaign to destroy the Catholic Church. And, in the case of at least two States, Colorado and Pennsylvania, by campaigns to destroy the reputations of lawmakers who supported the legislative actions.

All of this tells us that the compulsive drive to protect the institution and to prevent the full exposure of the depth and expanse of the corruption is still dominant. Discounting victims for the “good of the Church” violates the true nature of the People of God in favor of the preservation of the power of the clerical aristocracy. The real concern is not the “good of the Church”; it is the security of the governing elite. The hierarchy and those who support the traditional monarchical model of the Church must be confronted with this question: why has clerical identity and illusion of power taken precedence over some very basic Christian principle but especially over Christ’s dire warning to those who would harm the little ones?

One dimension of the response is rooted in the institutional narcissism that infects of clerical world and is rooted in the definition of Church that is essential to support and sustain what we have been led to believe to be the traditional theology of the episcopacy and the meaning of priesthood.

There have been recent conferences in the United States and in England that have examined the relationship of clericalism to the sexual abuse phenomenon. They have acknowledged what has been painfully obvious: the history of sexual abuse, denial and coverup has been embedded in the clerical culture that not only protected but enabled it. The power of this culture cannot be underestimated. It is hypocritical for clerics or anyone for that matter, to criticize and condemn clericalism while at the same time refusing to take the courageous step of examining the dogmas, laws and practices that will continue to support it.

It has become politically correct for some cardinals and bishops to issue statements and make speeches decrying the negative effects of clericalism yet the irony, and their lack of credibility, is that they are part of the social structure that needs clericalism to survive.

Clericalism is without doubt a deadly virus that has infected the entire people of God and has been a major causal factor in the sexual abuse phenomenon.

The institutional Church and the People of God are defined as one and the same primarily because of stiff opposition to the concept of Church as People of God by the deeply entrenched opposition of the heads of several Vatican congregations at Vatican II. Their objections are summed up in one word: power.

In reality the two are not the same. The institutional Church is a stratified society with a miniscule minority who make up the aristocracy that has complete power over the vast majority. There are 1,079,000,000 Catholics in the world. They are governed by approximately 3000 persons, an aristocracy that is exclusively patriarchal, celibate, male and ordained, and none have been or are parents. This, according to Canon Law, is the way God wants it to be. Pope Pius X articulated this in unequivocal terms in his 1906 encyclical *Vehementer nos*:

It follows that the Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the

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multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.

We may recoil at these words but are they so different from these:

“The laity should, as all Christians, promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds, since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers of the Church.” (*Lumen Gentium* 37)

Clericalism is without doubt a deadly virus that has infected the entire people of God and has been a major causal factor in the sexual abuse phenomenon. The existence and the tenacity of clericalism is rooted in the official theology of the priesthood, much of which is based on magical thinking, and in the persistent belief that the monarchical governmental structure that has to be protected at all costs is the only option even though there is no concrete and credible evidence to support this teaching.

But talking about it and condemning it is one thing. Getting rid of it is quite another. The horrific history of sexual violation and the systemic, destructive response, now out in the open, has acknowledged what the hierarchy does not want to face: The People of God and the Hierarchical Governmental structure are not one and the same and the hierarchical structure we have lived with can hardly be blamed on Christ as its author.

The official Church documents and the Code of Canon law are filled with analogies to shepherds, sheep, flocks and all are ordered to the concept of the Church as primarily pastoral in nature. If we look closely at the pattern and practice of “official” pastoral care we see that it is subordinate and supportive of the structures that are at the root of the problem. It is also subordinate to theological orthodoxy and obedience to the law, the moral norms and the bishops.

What exactly is “pastoral care.” The stark poverty of the concept is epitomized in Pope Benedict’s letter to the people of

Ireland which he wrote in response to the blistering report of the Murphy Commission, published on November 26, 2009.

“But it is in the Church that you will find Jesus Christ....seek a personal relationship with Him within the communion of his Church and he will never betray your trust...Only decisive action carried out with complete honesty will restore the respect and good will of the Irish people towards the Church to which we have consecrated our lives....” (Mar. 20, 2010).

He is asking victims of the clergy who violated their bodies and souls while they were active, devout believers in the institutional Church, to go back to this same Church and expect to be healed. They are told that the Church is not the errant priests or the dishonest bishops. The office is not the person who holds it! It is a long stretch to ask those who have been harmed to accept that excuse because the Church is the people and the office of bishop is, in the real world, what the incumbent makes it.

Benedict goes on to ask them to cooperate in the “rebuilding and renewal of our beloved Church.” Fixing the institutional Church is not even close to the agenda of most survivors nor is it on the agenda of many who have supported them including lay persons, and even some clergy and religious. Fixing to this point has meant administrative and bureaucratic responses, many of which are a definite step in a good direction but all of which steer clear of challenging the hierarchical system itself and moving beyond review boards, Independent Compensation and Reconciliation Programs or liturgical penance services. All of these are managed by the system that remains threatened and all have been used by bishops for public relations benefit to one degree or another.

From my own experience walking with victims in search of spiritual healing and the experience of my own often-times painful journey, I have learned that the healing is a long, even a life-time process that begins with the hard work of recognizing and dispelling the toxic and magical thinking about the nature of the priesthood, the nature of the institutional Church and ultimately the very existence of the god that we have been asked to

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believe in and trust. For many the healing only begins when we have effectively distanced ourselves from the source of the betrayal, the pain and the devastation of our souls. Then we can deal with the blinding anger, the profound loss of trust and the countless questions that keep coming up in the effort to sort out and wrap our minds around the collapse of an entire belief system.

For many of us, including the countless formerly obedient, devout victims, our belief system starts with what we are taught by the clerics and religious. Much of the anger and pain that follows upon the betrayal is fueled by the collapse of the complex world of belief and Catholic culture that is grounded in the hierarchical system. We are told the bishops are the official teachers of God's message for us. But, as more than one victim has asked me and as I have asked myself, "if they have systematically lied about the violation of children, what else have they lied about?"

Renewing or repairing the institutional Church is not the goal of the survivors of clerical violence and betrayal. Pope Benedict, God bless, him, is far removed from reality when he asks the victims to return to the institution for reconciliation and healing. A primary goal should be to find out why this tragedy has been so deeply embedded in the Church. This means going far deeper than the immediate level of causality.

It means leaving the John Jay Study, "Causes and Context," with its attempt at blaming the social and moral upheaval of the sixties, in the dust. It means the cessation of casting about to shift the blame elsewhere.

It means not allowing the administrative and canonical solutions to distract us into believing the hallucination that the ecclesiastical system that has created and sustained this plague for centuries can now fix it while at the same time saving the fundamental social and governmental clerical structure.

It means going beyond talking about clericalism to digging into the deep historical, philosophical, anthropological and theological roots of the core issues that have played the major role in sustaining the history of sexual violence and hierarchical betrayal.

Once the answers start to emerge, and the inevitable threats to the clerical and hierarchical *status quo* are faced, but not allowed to once again derail the search for truth, only then will we begin to gain mastery over the dark side. For those who still hope to find their true spiritual home in community of Catholic believers, it may well be the moment to embrace the truly foundational concept of Church as People of God and give it a chance. It might just work.

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