

UNSPEAKABLE DAMAGE
THE EFFECTS OF CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE:

A. W. Richard Sipe

There are severe and long-term consequences of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy. These results are so common either in combination or en toto that they are predictable in some form or other or to one degree or another in victims of clergy abuse. These elements have been identified from extensive research and observations of men and women survivors who were abused as children. I validate my observations as a result of the experience of counseling over 1,500 adults who have been abused as children, 500 of them by Catholic clergy or religious.

(Cf. Shanta R. Dube et.al. *Long Term Consequences of Childhood Sexual Abuse by Gender of Victim*. 2005. Am J of Preventative Medicine, pp. 430-438) also (Finkelhor, D. 1986. *A Source Book on Child Sexual Abuse*, Newbury Park CA, Sage Press)

1. **SEXUAL FOOTPRINTS:** The consequences of abuse are both psychological and physical, but the vehicle of the damage and trauma is sexual. The abuse forms the basis for, and invariably causes sexual dysfunction of some kind: impotence, sexual aversion, hyper sexuality, the development of paraphilias—frequently pornography, voyeurism, fetishes—or the perpetuation of abuse into a new generation. Studies demonstrate 20 percent of men who were abused become abusers; and 80 percent of abusing men were themselves abused.

Confusion about one's sexual identity is one of the first and most painful penalties a male victim pays in the aftermath of sexual abuse by a priest. Sexual functioning, even if it does not get mired in a paraphilia, is often impaired and crippled for normal functioning. The confusion of sex with violence that results in sadomasochistic behaviors and rape are among some of the dire social consequences of abuse beyond personal tragedy.

Freud originally taught that premature sexual exposure and abuse was the genesis of all neuroses. He later modified his theory to state that actual abuse was not necessary, but that even infantile fantasies of sex with the forbidden could cause the same psychic result and trauma. One of the reasons for Freud's change of heart was because of the sheer

number of the accounts of early abuse he heard. It was not popular in the 19th century to believe children when they contradicted or countered elders. This attitude plagues assault victims even today. Also, the social status of the family members who were the alleged abusers made Freud's conclusion impolitic and "doubtful." Nonetheless, Freud's original observations and conclusions, in spite of him, have withstood the test of time.

(Cf. S. Freud. *The Aetiology of Hysteria*. 1896, Standard Edition, Vol. III.) also (J.M. Masson. *The Assault on Truth*. Ballantine; 2003 ed.)

Even currently many people find it difficult to believe the enormous psychic consequences from what they would consider a "minor sexual infraction" or a minimal event of sexual touch. Freud as early as 1893 wrote, *For we very often find that the content and determinants of hysterical phenomena [read emotional reaction] are events which are in themselves quite trivial, but which have acquired high significance from the fact that they occurred at specially important moments when the patient's predisposition was pathologically increased.*

(Cf. S. Freud, *The Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena*. Standard Edition, Vol. III, p.38)

2. THE LEGACY OF ANXIETY: Anxiety overwhelms the victim. A host of addictive behaviors involving alcohol, drugs, sex or other acting out, out-of-control behaviors are endemic among many men and women who have suffered abuse. These are among the means victims use to mollify their confusion, the pain of trauma, and unconscious.

If child sexual abuse is not promptly and effectively treated, long-term symptoms can continue into adulthood. A whole range of emotional and behavioral problems can be traced to early abuse. The most common being anxiety or PTSD, sexual anxieties and disorders mentioned above, low self-esteem and poor body image, depression and thoughts of suicide.

These anxieties can lead specifically to phobias, generalized anxiety, panic episodes, obsessions, compulsions, and irrational anger perpetuated by the inability of their young personalities to absorb and master what has happened to them.

Seminarians traditionally learned about *Scrupulosity* when they were studying to hear confessions. People with scruples are tortured by unwanted thoughts (or impulse driven repetitive actions). These people often turned to a priest

to counsel or absolve them of the thoughts, images, or desires they found troublesome or abhorrent. Frequently the ideation had to do with forbidden and intolerable sexual images or ideas.

Today this condition would be diagnosed psychiatrically as *Obsessive-Compulsive* disorder and its etiology is often tied up with early sexual abuse, because abuse impairs a child's sense of self-control and opens a person to addictive patterns of tension reduction.

(Cf. *Obsessive Compulsive Related Disorders*. E. Hollander, the American Psychiatric Press, 1993) also (*The Obsessive Personality*. L. Salzman, Aronson, 1973)

Sexual abuse by an adult, no matter how kindly cloaked is an assault. Inevitably most victims will experience sex with an adult as a genuine *Trauma*, because the occurrence does not fit into the psychic or social reality of the minor. The discordance of the relationship and exchange cannot be absorbed.

We have all learned a great deal about PTSD from treating war veterans who after coming through battle conditions, life threats, death or injury to companions (often seemingly unscathed) they have recurrent, distressing recollections, dreams, and emotional reactions. Unpredictable sights, sounds, or thoughts can reignite the trauma.

Some victims of clergy abuse have distressing reactions at the sight of a roman collar, a church, rosary, etc. or anything that may trigger a memory of abusive events. Diagnostically Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a well-defined psychiatric condition that plagues countless victims of childhood abuse, in fact, studies indicate the between one third and one half of childhood victims of abuse develop symptoms of PTSD.

(Cf. Finkelhor, D. "What's wrong with sex between adults and children?" In *Ethics and the Problem of Sexual Abuse*. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 49, Pp. 692-697. 1979)

3. A LIFETIME OF DEPRESSION: Depression is a common affliction in the modern world. Some studies say there is a 50 percent chance of one lifetime incidence of major depression among the American population. But the abused have distinct and added burdens that propel them toward depression that tend to be recurrent and sustained: In the abused, the loss of innocence, the loss of confidence, the loss of faith, the loss self esteem, and the loss of their

youth lay down deep roots to inevitable periods or long term states of depression.

(Cf. *Treating the Lifetime Health Effects of Childhood Victimization*. Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., 2003)

4. TRUST-BETRAYED FOREVER: Betrayal so deep and so fundamental is the experience of a minor violated by the trusted that the incident(s) becomes a life-altering condition long after the real threat of abuse has past. Certainly this severe result prevails when the abuser is a parent who represents the whole world of security for a child; when the abuser is a parental figure who also represents God, the spiritual world, and the eternal the betrayal leaves the victim nowhere to turn. All supposedly secure and trustworthy persons and institutions become suspect.

This is what the minor victim experiences—fundamental abandonment and aloneness. How can persons revive trust when they have been wounded so vitally at a stage in their life when they were intrinsically able to give themselves without reservation to trust an elder only to be unspeakably violated? Many can't ever recover confidence and trust in a world that betrayed their existence. They needed trust—as we all do—for a sense of survival. When the abusing elder is a parent, or even more spectacularly a representative of God, the loss of trust is nearly irretrievable.

Beyond loss of trust in the outside world, abuse betrayal attacks self trust in a fundamental way—the loss of trust in one's memory and mind. A disruption of cognition and memory can occur during and after childhood abuse. Cognitive and neurological mechanisms that may underlie the forgetting of abuse have been scientifically identified.

(Cf. Freyd, J. et. al. "*The Science of Child Sexual Abuse*," *Science*, 4, 22, 2005.) also (Freyd, Jennifer, *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Harvard University Press, 1996)

5. RELATIONSHIPS IN RAGS: The person who has been abused in childhood is unable to weave her or his relationships out of whole cloth. The fibers of their personalities have been torn; their ability to establish solid relationships is in tatters. Most times they don't understand why they can't connect with other people in meaningful ways. They "beat themselves up" repeating over and over again destructive liaisons. They become abusive in some way to the friend they wish to be close with. Or they repeat a burdensome dependency, constructed but unresolved in their childhood. No one can meet their needs because their needs are the deficits of a childhood lost. They are the phantom, wounded

children in the skin of adequate appearing adults. They constantly disappoint and mystify themselves and everyone else who could have meaning to them. Divorce, separations, alienation, antipathies, and hollowness mark the world they inhabit with family, friends, and co-workers.

6. NONE SO ISOLATED: The survivors of abuse have a lonely core that isolates them from themselves and everyone else. That core is unassailable because it is entrapped in an unspoken and unimaginable secrecy. They can't share because the secret is often hidden from them. Even if they have memory traces they cannot put them together in any coherent way that will make sense to anyone. Even if the memories are clear, indelibly burnt into their mind and heart, many men and women have no way to scale the wall of guilt and shame that surrounds their childhood secrets.

Victims, in their isolation, think that they are to only victim.

With their secrets they are isolated from anyone they could hope might understand what they have been through. They don't understand themselves. How can they believe what happened to them in secret when their experience of their whole world--family, school, friends, church--appear so unaware and oblivious of their darkness and trauma.

The survivors guard their secret even if it makes them ill. Unto death some victims hug their secret because they promised to keep it. Some children defend their abuser because the abuse is bound up with the promise of security and the feeling of being loved and special in spite of contrary evidence.

It takes victims of childhood sexual abuse years to straighten out their trauma experience. The mixed feelings of premature excitement, guilt transferred from the aggressor, the challenges of separating fantasies from reality are tasks far beyond the ego capacity of most minors. It takes the average victim of abuse 25 to 30 years to bring them to the realization that they were not at fault. The guilt they feel is not rightfully theirs but the property of the abuser. The anger they experience is justified. It takes time to learn that they have rights and power even in face of opposition from men and institutions they once considered invincible and infallible.

7. PERSONALITIES PERVERTED: *Perverted* may seem to be a strong word to describe the effect on the personality development of young persons who have been sexual abused. But the word is precise. Abuse twists the normal progression of personality growth and development.

Over and above the distortions of perceptions and reactions that anxiety and depression impose on the developing child, the behavior of an adult who acts in ways that are socially abhorrent and morally wrong challenge the child's conscience and judgment beyond reconcilable bounds. The clergyman presents himself, and is accepted, as a public moral arbiter. Yet this civic and religious leader draws the youngster into acts that are socially and morally unacceptable. And must remain hidden. The bond of secrecy forms a noose that chokes maturing expression.

The relationship is essentially conflicted and confusing. The child is seduced into a seemingly loving secure relationship that actually separates him or her from peers and family. The seducer grooms the child into a position of specialness that makes age appropriate friends and normal activities less attractive and inaccessible.

What is real? What is pretense? What seemed to be love and care turns out to be selfishness and exploitation. One who appeared to be giving and generous was actually self-seeking and hateful. The abusive bond of childhood can become the model for adult interactions predisposing one to a Schizoid-like personality pattern of interaction.

A child's conscience is formed not simply by education, but by adult example, experience, and relationships with others that have been meaningful to him or her.

Many abusers, even if they are clergymen, can be, and are deficient in their quality of conscience. We use to call these people ``sociopaths.'' It is still a good descriptive word and goes to the heart of the priest with such a personality. (Now if a diagnostic term is used that person is identified an *Antisocial Personality*)

People are usually loath to judge their minister antisocial, because clergy do so many good and helpful things in the ordinary services they provide. In spite of that seemingly mitigating circumstance I prefer to understand many priests and bishops who abuse minors by the word *Sociopath*. It defines a person who fails to conform to lawful behaviors; he is a man who is often impulsive; who lacks remorse; lacks empathy because he is adept at conning others for his own pleasure or profit; he feels entitled, above the law; he can have a reckless disregard for the safety and welfare of others.

(The classic, and most excellent description of this personality is found in *The Mask of Sanity*, Hervey Cleckley. C.V. Mosby, St. Louis, first published it in 1964. It is still in print in a 4th edition.)

Priest sexual abusers are con artists. They are pretenders. They often offend in financial ways also. The priesthood provides them with a mask of moral rectitude and sanity. This personality type represents itself in every rank of the priesthood and propagates itself in many ways including through violating young boys and girls who learn their lessons too well. The progeny of these sociopath priests can express themselves in going on to abuse another generation of children, lie, steal or cheat their way into prison, or assume their own respectable masks to hide their real self--like their mentors

One of the most disastrous personality distortions is what is now termed the *Borderline Personality*. These people have a pervasive pattern of unstable interpersonal relationships. They fluctuate between idealizing and denigrating others, often to the extreme. They are saddled with an unstable self-image. They can mutilate themselves and threaten harm or suicide. They find themselves in the middle of outrageous angry outbursts. They feel "hollow;" at the same time, and perhaps because of their emptiness, they create havoc all around them.

These people have been psychically injured during the earliest years of their development. Their early basic insecurity makes them particularly vulnerable to multiple kinds of psychic and physical injuries as they grow up.

Clergy pedophiles and abusers of minors prey on the vulnerable. Vulnerable families (the poor and dysfunctional), vulnerable circumstances (death or illness) or (the overly pious and dependent) can provide opportunities for clergy entrée into the homes and lives of the trusting-needy, making them targets for abuse.

The PERSONALITY OF THE PRIEST PREDITOR: A man with any type of personality, certainly including psychotic, can sexually abuse a minor.

No one has yet proposed that there exists one set type of person or priest who turns out to be an abuser of minors. There is no test able to predict future sexual abuse of a minor.

We have now, however, enough experience with clergy abusers that clinicians are able to outline a sketch of the priest who has abused.

He tends to be *Narcissistic*. That is he tends to have a sense of self-importance and entitlement; he sees himself as special; he tends to exploit others for his own gratification. Since his needs and pleasure comes first he lacks empathy for the feelings of others.

The priest predator is an Angry man often with the face of a calm and gentle pastor.

Outward grace, superficial interaction, and social charm frequently cover the *Isolation* and friendlessness that an abuser feels. Of necessity (except when predators ban together to share their sexual predilection) a child sexual abuser has to hide his activity and his real self.

Sometimes the abusing priest may have been abused himself, and not rarely by a priest.

The hidden life of the priest abuser requires that he split his life into two parts: the acceptable and even exemplary public life has to be separated from (and reconciled with) the socially reprehensible and morally defective secret life he pursues.

A priest perpetrator is a torn man who can make himself feel comfortable. Priests who profess celibacy publicly and privately abuse minors know what they are doing. No matter how constrained or compelled, they make a choice. They are *Doubling*. Their priesthood, their way of life, all the benefits and security of their profession hang on their promise to be celibate. If they publicly renounce celibacy they lose everything. These men try to adapt a celibate requirement with their irreconcilable sexual urges. They pose good motives while participating in evil behavior.

(Robert Jay Lifton describes this psychological dynamic that parallels what many priests employ. Cf. *The Nazi Doctors*, Basic Books, 1986).

The rationalizations are legion. Here follows a sample of some justifications I have heard, recited by men with a straight face and a conviction that they really were celibate: "I work hard and I deserve it. Sex is natural. It doesn't hurt anybody. I'm showing God's love. This child needs love. I loved him/her. I am giving good instructions in sex. Priests are only human. I'm only giving them what they were asking for. She/he seduced me" etc.

Since the darkness of the doubling can't withstand the light of examination the split-priest often has to struggle with paranoid fears that he will be found out. He has to isolate himself ever more carefully from adult scrutiny and discovery.

8. SELF DESTRUCTION: Suicide is the ultimate act of self-destruction and there are untold numbers of men and women, violated as minors, who resort to this ultimate act of desperation. But there are other behaviors of self-torture

and slow death that are the result of being sexually attacked and abused by a priest when one was a minor.

Here are some examples of the disastrous effects inflicted on the abused:

- Persons who can't continue their studies because the injury to self esteem is so fundamental that they simply are unable to muster the energy or confidence necessary to master tasks that are easily within their natural potential. Interference with education also limits earning potential.
- Persons who plunge into the world of crime because the abuse makes them feel that that is where they belong.
- Persons whose unconscious guilt over their sexual involvement (abuse by a priest or bishop) makes them feel that they are the ones who deserve punishment, so they unwittingly devise ways to defeat and humiliate themselves. They do not deserve success.
- Persons who get caught in their addictive self-medication to the degree that they run afoul of family, work, law, and impair their health and life.
- Some persons who overdose, who end up in fatal car accidents, who contract incurable diseases like AIDS, who get themselves murdered do not leave suicide notes, but their fate was sealed by their abuse. They are completing what the abusive priest or bishop began--the death of their sense of self-preservation.

Many bishops and priests, abusers or not, tend to minimize the effects of abuse by a clergyman. ``What's the big deal?...It was only a touch❖It happened just once❖They had sex with others❖They knew what they were doing❖Why can't they get over it?❖They should just forget it❖It was at least partially their fault❖Christ stands for forgiveness❖Why can't they forgive?...etc. I have heard every one of these justifications and more.

Sexual abuse of a minor is rightfully called *Soul Murder*. Many bishops and priests still miss the full significance of this reality. They have cooperated in the process of abuse, selected and trained the perpetrators and protected them precisely because they minimized the effects, and by their

neglect and inaction justified priests betraying the trust of their people. Even today the church does not take celibacy or its violation seriously in action, only in documents and words. When St. Peter Damian in 1051 addressed Pope Leo IX about the sexual abuse of boys--he held superiors responsible for the behavior and the harm done--he spoke a truth that prevails today.