

**50th International Eucharistic Congress,
10-17 June 2012, Dublin, Ireland**

Clergy Sexual Misconduct: Some Reflections from Asia

+ Luis Antonio G. Tagle

Archbishop of Manila, Philippines

Tuesday 12th June 2012

The so-called crisis of the clergy unfolding these past years is immense in scope. It includes allegations of sexual misconduct, suspicions about the clergy's handling of money, accusations of misuse of authority, inappropriate lifestyle and a host of other things. The faithful are appalled at the rudeness of their pastors. Priests who do not preach well or do not preside at sacraments religiously cause scandal as well. So when we refer to the crisis in the Church related to the clergy, we are dealing with a multi-faceted reality. But our colloquium is centred on the allegations and actual cases of sexual misconduct on the part of the clergy.

At first glance, this crisis seems to be about explicitly sexual behaviour only. But a closer look at the actual cases reveals that deep theological, spiritual, anthropological and pastoral issues are involved. That is why the impressionist way by which some people tackle the problem is quite inadequate and even unfair.

We almost automatically associate the word *crisis* with a problem or a difficult situation. But the root of the word *crisis* is the Greek *krino*, which means to make distinctions and to exercise judgment. It also connotes being subjected to judgment or being brought to trial. So the core of a crisis lies in the fact that a particular situation demands discernment, right judgment and decision. On the basis of our judgment and decision, others will judge us. I believe the allegations and actual cases of sexual misconduct on the part of the clergy present a crisis in the two senses of the word. On the one hand, we have to understand, judge and decide on various aspects of the matter. On the other hand we should listen to what the world and the rest of the Church say about the clergy. To pretend that no problem exists does not help.

An Attempt at Understanding the Crisis

It is good to be reminded at the outset that the sexual misconduct of the clergy covers a whole range of actions that are quite diverse and could not be lumped together



under one category. Unfortunately treating all the cases uniformly has been the panic response in some quarters. While they all fall under the general heading of sexual misconduct, each case is unique. But due to the limitations of our conference, we cannot deal with the incidents individually.

My reflection is meant to offer perspectives on the sexual misconduct by the clergy from the Churches in Asia. Since the vast continent of Asia is home to diverse cultures, traditions and histories, it is almost impossible to pin down a single Asian perspective. My Philippine background will undeniably surface in this paper. But I consulted with some bishops, pastors, religious, laypersons, social scientists and theologians from the member Churches of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) to gather some data, though not in a strictly scientific way.

Because the Church is a tiny minority in most Asian countries, the reported cases of sexual abuse of children and other sexual misconduct by the clergy are fewer compared to the national averages. This does not mean, however that the Churches could ignore the few reported cases. In some parts of Asia, incidents of paedophilia are less than those of homosexual and heterosexual relations with adults. Some priests have sired children. So far there have been few legal cases filed against clerics in Asia in the area of sexual criminal acts. When the crisis erupted in the Northern hemisphere, there was a tendency to think of the problem as mainly tied to Western cultures. But such a view changed when similar cases surfaced in Asia. While the various Episcopal conferences and religious orders have been addressing the allegations as they arose, there is a pressing need to formulate national pastoral guidelines for handling such cases. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines has undergone a long process of crystallizing its guidelines that are now being finalized for presentation to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Other Episcopal conferences in Asia are in various stages of formulating their respective guidelines and codes of conduct for the clergy. The relative "silence" with which the victims and Asian Catholics face the scandal is partly due to the culture of "shame" that holds dearly one's humanity, honour and dignity. For Asian cultures, a person's shame tarnishes one's family, clan and community. Silence could be a way of preserving what is left of one's honour. It could also be a sign of trauma. But many victims and counsellors have discovered the potential of "shame" or love for one's human dignity as a source of self-respect, courage and determination to act towards healing and renewal in the Church, especially of the clergy.



At this point I would like to indicate some aspects of the crisis generated by the sexual misconduct of the clergy. The experiences of the Churches in Asia have called our attention to these elements.

First is the personal and relational aspect. In the holistic and person-oriented worldview of Asian peoples, sexuality deals with a person's identity and relationships. It is not just about sexual preferences and actions arising from them. The fundamental question of sexuality is "Who am I?" If we put it more philosophically and theologically, it asks "What is a human being? What is the role of relationships in being human? What types of relationships are truly human and humanizing?"

The second aspect of the crisis is cultural. The crisis has put Asian cultures and culturally accepted behaviours to judgment. The Bishops of the Philippines have engaged on a reflection on some elements of Filipino culture that might serve as breeding ground for possible abusive behavior. Let us indicate some examples from the Philippine scene that may have similarities with the experience in other countries of Asia. 1.) Filipino culture is a touching culture. It is almost second nature for Filipinos to touch. People flock to the priests after mass to kiss their hands. They appreciate a gentle touch from their pastors too. Groups of teenage boys or girls find nothing wrong to hug one another or envelope a friend's shoulders with their arms in public. We touch children a lot. But they cannot clearly distinguish an affectionate touch from a malicious one. They are vulnerable to manipulation through touch. 2.) Philippine culture confers much power on adults and those in authority. Minors and subordinates tend to be seen as "possessions" of adults who could do as they please in the name of discipline and their good. The perspective of the child or subordinate is rarely considered. This vacuum could make adults insensitive to a child's emotion, pain and needs. 3.) Family is loosely and broadly defined in Philippine culture. We are amazed at how a priest is easily counted a member of a Filipino Catholic family. They open their doors and allow him to enter the most private sections of the house, even the bedrooms of their children. Culturally that expresses trust in the priest. But when abuse occurs, it is more painful because the abuser is not a stranger but one considered a "family member." 4.) Our culture tends to regard the clergy as more than ordinary humans because they possess extraordinary or divine powers. Power in whatever form can harm when misused. Because the culture clouds over the clergy's humanity, some of them hide their true selves and lead double lives. Duplicity can breed abusive tendencies. In sum, Asian cultures are being asked to discern. What is our concept of "boundaries"? How can we prevent cultural expressions of affection and intimacy from becoming tools of abuse? How do our cultures view women, the sexual act, maleness, etc.?



Third is the ecclesiastical aspect. When a cleric transgresses, even if the action is not criminal in the civil forum, ecclesiastical vows or promises are violated due to norms that are in place. The crisis urges us to understand more deeply the Church's discipline and to help the world understand it too. A case in point is celibacy. A fuller and more just understanding should situate it within the Church's rich spiritual, pastoral and canonical tradition. The crisis has challenged us to have a more adequate understanding of the promise to remain celibate and to lead a chaste life. This approach will resonate with the traditions of the ancient religions in Asia that value celibacy. We need, especially in formation, theology, canon law and moral theology a serious evaluation of this issue and the varying opinions on it. Many people think that celibacy is simply a rule that the conservative Church has to observe for the sake of tradition. Some make it the culprit for all types of sexual misconduct. Others defend it but in a narrowly legalistic way that proves ineffectual. We need a serene but comprehensive consideration of the matter.

The fourth is the legal aspect. The laws of countries cover a whole range of acts deemed criminal, some of which are in the area of sexual acts. There are also legal definitions that do not always correspond to our ordinary usage of terms. It is good for the clergy to know how the law defines a child, rape and harassment. For example, there are laws safeguarding the well being of employees. Church people must be sensitive to harassment in the workplace. What signs of affection and types of gifts are not offensive? What could be construed as harassment? The diverse political situations in Asian countries necessitate that the Churches instruct their clergy in their country's legal systems. Clerics are not exempt from the observance and weight of civil law. It should be noted that the jurisprudence in the Philippines regarding sexual misconduct of the clergy is not fully developed yet. Lawyers generally follow the unfolding jurisprudence in the United States.

The fifth aspect is the media. Blessed Pope John Paul II called the contemporary means of social communications as the new areopagus. We live in a world dependent on and driven by social communication. In itself the world of media and internet constitutes a new culture. For the Church, mass media need to be evangelized as they could very well serve as a means for the spread of the Gospel and its values. However media practitioners observe that when they report on abuses committed by politicians, financiers, etc, the Church appreciates them. But when they expose anomalies within the Church, they are branded as anti-Church and anti-Catholic, even if their information comes from people close to the Church. The crisis invites us to reassess our relationship with the media. As we challenge them to be fair and truthful in whatever they are reporting, the Church should also



be prepared to be scrutinized by media, provided the norms of fairness and truthfulness are applied to all, especially the victims. We cannot ignore the fact, however that in some parts of Asia, an anti-Christian sentiment has penetrated social communications.

Finally there is a pastoral and spiritual aspect to the crisis. Ultimately the question for the clergy is one of personal integrity before God and the Church. I admit that some of the beautiful teachings of the Church on priesthood are not always observed by us priests. Integrity in ministerial life and relationships is demanded not only for the good of the clergy but also for the good of the Church community. The Church is harmed and wounded when pastors are abusive in their behaviour. The crisis definitely has a pastoral dimension.

Some Elements of a Pastoral Response to the Crisis

We now present some directions that the Bishops of the Philippines have identified in their response to allegations and actual cases of sexual misconduct. Many Churches in Asia are opting for the same pastoral thrusts.

The first element of a response is the pastoral care of the victims and their families. Pastoral care encompasses justice for them, compassion for them, protection for them, and even restitution in some cases. The leaders of the Church have always been accused of helping only the priest offender to the neglect of the victim. It is painful to listen to victims. But allowing their stories to unfold does not only help them but hopefully awakens compassion in us. We learn the dynamics of victimization and the victim's reaction to their situation. Such learning could serve as a deterrent to victimization in the Church. The pastoral care of victims and their families resonates with cultural and religious traditions of Asia that put high value on compassion for the suffering.

The second aspect is the pastoral care of the hurting community, whether a parish, a diocese, or a congregation. The communities where the violations occurred are also wounded and need pastoral attention. The priest could be taken out of a parish to undergo renewal or even be dismissed. The victim could transfer residence. But the community remains. For a parish community the pain lies in the violation of trust. How do we handle communities whose trust in their priests has been violated? If we do not take the right steps or show empathy, the community might conclude that the Church tolerates these kinds of behaviours, or the Church simply does not care. Then their wounds become deeper. I suggest that in Asia diocesan and congregational guidelines be drawn to protect and to care for wounded communities. Changing pastors is not enough. We should find an effective way



of allowing people to voice hurts, to grieve, to understand, to forgive, to institute reform, and to move on in hope. The Asian propensity to quickly restore “harmony” often makes us believe that healing has already occurred when it really has not. We need to discover ways of community healing akin to Asian sensibilities.

The third aspect is the pastoral care for the priest offender. The offender who has admitted guilt is often lost, confused, and shamed. He needs help, especially from experts, to understand and evaluate his situation. He must discover whether or not he has the capacity for celibate living. Some decisions have to be made. The best way to care for the offender is to make him face up to the misconduct. He must be made aware of ecclesiastical and canonical processes governing his particular case. The bishop must carefully observe the procedures especially when the grave matter could lead to dismissal from the clerical state. And if the offender decides to be dispensed from the obligations of the clerical state, then the diocese or the religious order helps the priest to start a new life. All the way, every step should be taken to ensure fairness, truthfulness and compassion. We are happy to note that many priests, religious women and men and laypersons in Asia have been preparing themselves professionally to be of help to clergy with special needs. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) established and operates the St. John Marie Vianney-Galilee Centre for Priestly Renewal that offers various programs, one of which provides pastoral care to offender priests. The CBCP also has an Office for Bishops’ Concerns to extend fraternal help to bishops in difficult situations.

The fourth aspect especially needed in Asia, is the pastoral care of the priest offender’s family. The offender is not the only one shamed. His family suffers too. The family members feel betrayed by their son or brother. They even blame themselves. “Where did we go wrong in raising him?” Though seldom verbalized, guilt nags their heart. They withdraw from the community and suffer in silence. They need caring, particularly in Asia where the dishonour of one person wounds the family and clan.

The fifth aspect is the pastoral care of the non-offender clergy. Those priests who have not committed any offense are also confused. Some might be fearful of their own past and wounds. It is also possible for priests to look at one another with suspicions about each other’s past. Some of the priest offenders have been dismissed from the clerical state, some are serving their prison terms and some are confined in treatment centres. But who continue to face the community and the rest of the world? The non-offender clergy carry that burden. They have to answer questions. They have to share the shame of their fellow priests by their mere belonging to the one priesthood. Even if they do not talk openly, doubts about their



vocation could creep in. The caring for non-offender clergy still needs to be developed in the Churches of Asia.

The sixth area of response is the pastoral care of superiors and bishops. It is difficult and painful to be a superior or a bishop nowadays. They feel lost when a cleric commits sexual abuse. As they help their priests, they also have to judge on a matter many of them do not fully grasp. At the same time they cannot defend the priests while neglecting truth, justice, and the good of the victims and the community. Superiors feel battered from all sides. They are accused of covering up if they try to be discreet. If they are firm, they are accused of lack of compassion. But experience in Asia has taught that inaction, mere geographic transfer of priests and insensitivity to the victims compromise the integrity of the religious superior or bishop. We commend the FABC Office for the Clergy for organizing formation programs that would equip the bishops of Asia to understand and handle cases of sexual misconduct of the clergy.

The final area of response is formation, both seminary formation and the ongoing formation of the clergy. First is formation in human maturity. Of the many aspects of human maturity one important area is responsible relationships. This is the focus of the crisis: the capacity to relate responsibly and with accountability. Sensitivity to women and children, understanding one's human and sexual development, and working in teams are necessary. Many formation centres, schools of theology, Episcopal commissions for women and religious communities of women in Asia have been actively involved in helping seminarians and clergy in this regard, as they also assist victims. The second is ministerial accountability arising from clarity of purpose and identity. If a priest is not clear about his identity and purpose, then he will not be accountable for his actions as a minister. He becomes accountable for all his actions to the extent that he is clear about who he is as a priest and what he is for in the Church. Third is the purification of motivation. Why am I in this kind of life? Is it for a sense of grandeur, a sense of authority that the culture and the Church give? Is it in order to get money the quickest way possible? In Asia we should also appeal to our Catholic faithful not to pamper or spoil our seminarians and priests. Fourth is formation in spirituality. We need to develop a spirituality that enables us to discern God's calling at every moment and to respond in service to God in and at all times. Finally we need to take preventive steps in the ongoing formation of the clergy. The aspects of formation mentioned above should continue in priestly life. But because of the specific crisis we are facing, we need to revitalize the community life of priests, common prayer, sharing of resources, spiritual direction, simplicity of lifestyle, and academic renewal among other things. We rejoice that the stigma associated with "renewal programs" has been slowly disappearing. In



the Philippines, the CBCP Vianney-Galilee Centre has contributed much to the positive regard for clergy renewal. The trained members of the team offer not only therapeutic sessions but also pro-active programs like the Priests' Assisted Renewal Integration, Courses in Human Sexuality and Celibate Living, Assisted Intensive Renewal for Seminary Personnel, Sessions for priests in Mid-life Transition and in Senior Years. The centre has been frequented by bishops and priests from other Asian countries as well. We do not need to wait for a bomb to explode. Preventing it from exploding is the best response.

I think more work needs to be done in Asia in developing programs for protecting children, women and the vulnerable members of the Church from sexual abuse. Each episcopal conference also needs clear directions on how to deal with their respective government authorities when criminal cases involving the clergy arise.

The Churches in Asia are now examining the cultures, traditions, family structures and emerging trends in our societies to understand the roots of the crisis. We also want to tap the resources offered by Asian philosophies and religiosity embedded in our cultures for an adequate response. The most important resource for us however is the Christian faith that impels us to live in integrity, justice, truth and love.

We lament that in the vast continent of Asia children are exploited in many ways: a booming sex tourism that attracts paedophiles, the kidnapping and selling of children, the trading of body parts of children, abortion especially of girls, child labour or slavery, children being trained for warfare or crimes and many other untold acts of violence against children. A Church that loves and protects children could be a force of renewal in Asia, even if it is a little flock. Blessed Pope John Paul II said in *Ecclesia in Asia* that Jesus was born on Asian soil. The Word of God became a child and grew in wisdom and grace in Asia, as an Asian. Jesus has indeed united himself with every child in Asia.



Some Resource Materials

Asian Vocations Symposium: Asian Vocations Today, Samphran, Bangkok, Thailand, Oct. 22-27, 2007, FABC Papers No. 123, (Hongkong: FABC, 2007).

Bermisa, Sr. Nila, M.M., *That She may Dance Again: Rising from Pain of Violence Against Women in the Philippine Catholic Church* (Manila; Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines), 2011.

Kochappilly, Paulachan, "Sexuality as an Invitation to Intimacy and Integration," *Journal of Dharma* 34 (2009): 19-35.

Mynatty, Hormis, "A Comprehensive Vision of Sexuality from a Christian Perspective," *Jeevadhara* 33, no. 198: 458-475.

Parappully, Jose, SDB and Mannath, Joe, SDB, "Religious and Priestly Formation and Emotional Health," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections* 73 (2009): 274-293.

Pinto, Lawrence, MSIJ, Editor, "Seminar for Bishops of Asia: Caring for Priests – Especially for Those with Difficulties, Redemptorist Center, Pattaya, Thailand, 27-31 August 2007," FABC Papers No. 122 (Hong Kong: FABC, 2007).

Srampickal, Thomas, "Reflections on Celibacy," *Jeevadhara* 33, no. 198: 497-509.