Priests, Power and Sexual Abuse

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Knowledge has been long recognized as a source of power. Moreover, it has been conventionally identified as one of the best available resources for altering human behavior that involves an abuse of power. The pursuit of scientific knowledge about power is an enterprise initiated only during the past half century, but research is already producing information linking power closely with sex and violence. Harvard psychologist David C. McClelland, for example, in Power: The Inner Experience, reported his finding that men with a high level of need for power are more likely than others to read Playboy and other "girlie" magazines and watch TV programs that convey images of violence. Other research, along with clinical experience, has repeatedly shown that power is an element intimately and consistently related to sexual abuse. It is that relationship which this article will explore, particularly as it exists in cases where priests are the perpetrators and their victims are children.

Clarification of Terms

Sexual abuse of children involves an adult's intense and recurrent sexual urges and sexually arousing fantasies which are expressed in sexual activity with prepubescent (generally age 13 or younger) children or with an adolescent (from age 14 through 17), with the adult at least five years older than the victim. The perpetrator of such activity is usually called a pedophile when a victim is a child and an ephebophile when a pubescent child or adolescent is abused.

The term power is used in conversation by millions of people every day, but most of the time its meaning is assumed to be clear enough that definition is unnecessary. They would probably be willing to accept without question the way sociologist Max Weber defined it: power is "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons." The distinguished economist John Kenneth Galbraith, in The Anatomy of Power, agrees with Weber when he describes the exercise of power simply as "someone or some group is imposing its will and purpose or purposes on others, including on those who are reluctant or adverse." It is Galbraith's understanding of the various types of power and their sources that I intend to use as a theoretical skeleton on which to flesh out my perception of the ways power plays a role in sexual abuse.

Three Instruments of Power

In his dissection of power's "anatomy", Galbraith identifies three instruments for wielding or enforcing power. He designates them as "condign power", "compensatory power", and "conditioned power".

Condign power obtains the submission of others to one's purpose(s) by inflicting or threatening some sort of adverse consequence(s), should the other refuse to comply. An example would be a priest threatening to humiliate a child in public if

the child does not participate in the sexual behavior the man has in mind. Or, he might threaten to prevent the boy or girl from playing on a school team, which the child ardently desires to do. Galbraith writes: "Condign power threatens the individual with something physically or emotionally painful enough so that he forgoes pursuit of his own will or preference in order to avoid it." In brief, this instrument of power wins submission by promising or administering punishment.

Compensatory power is demonstrated by offering an individual financial payment or some other sort of reward so that she or he forgoes pursuit of her or his own preference in order to obtain what is promised instead. For example, a priest desiring sexual compliance from a child may offer to take the boy or girl on a trip or provide a longed-for item of clothing as payment for an affirmative response. Giving something of value to the child is essential, and even praise or signs of admiration may serve as the form of reward. If the child being abused is young enough, or naive enough, the priest may succeed in obtaining compliance by promising that God will reward the "person who is good to a priest" with the gift of eternal happiness. On the contrary, in the same circumstances the priest may use condign power to threaten the child with interminable suffering in hell as payment for non-cooperation in the proposed sexual deed.

Conditioned power is exercised by changing someone's belief(s). Through persuasion, education, or exposure to prevailing social beliefs about what is natural, proper or right, the person becomes disposed to submit to the will of another or of others. In this case, the submission reflects the person's own preference, and he or she does not even recognize that submission is occurring. For example, a priest may persuasively teach the child that sexual actions are acts of love and that God will be pleased if the child shows love for the priest this way. Or, the priest may capitalize on the fact that in the child's milieu (society) there is a commonly held conviction that anything that a priest wants should be done for him or given to him as a sign of gratitude for all he is doing for his parishioners. Again, as seen in these examples, this third instrument of power involves the child's conviction (resulting from becoming conditioned to behavior) that responding to a priest in a cooperative way -- even sexually -- is right and good, just as being obedient to parents is right and good.

Conditioning is considered explicit when the child's belief (preference) is deliberately cultivated by the priest. On the other hand, a preference can be dictated by the culture (represented by the family) surrounding the child; in this case the conditioning is termed implicit. An instance of the latter would be the conditioned belief that priests -- since they are good and holy men -- deserve to be shown respectful subservience at all times, and their integrity is never to be questioned, even if they are saying that the sexual behavior they are proposing is "just for the good" and "sex education" of the child.

Obviously, simplistic explicit conditioning of children in the home, in Catholic schools, and at church on Sunday, can heighten their vulnerability to sexual abuse if authority figures (priests, coaches, police, clergy, etc.) are designated as always deserving complete respect and unquestioning compliance with their wishes. It is the cultivation of such misleading beliefs, either explicitly or implicitly, that allows the priest to have control and power over the child and his or her behavior.

Galbraith lucidly summarizes the way implicit conditioning is accomplished:

> All societies have a yet more comprehensive form of social conditioning. It is sufficiently subtle and pervasive that it is deemed a natural and integral part of life itself; there is no visible or specific effort that wins the requisite belief and submission. Thus parental authority need not in most cases be asserted; it is seemingly normal and what all children by nature accept. And similarly the authority of the schoolteacher and priest...Such implicit conditioning bears comprehensively and invisibly upon the individual from birth.
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> Once belief is won, whether by explicit or implicit conditioning, the resulting subordination to the will of others is thought to be the product of the individual's own moral or social sense -- his or her feeling as to what is right or good.

Three Sources of Power

After examining those three forms (instruments) of power, the question naturally arises: What permits or enables individuals to exercise them? Galbraith suggests that there are three sources, or causes: these are personality, property and organization.

The personality of the individual with power may include physical strength or size, together with qualities such as charm, kindness, interest, intelligence, humor, solemnity, seeming honesty, and the ability to express thought in a cogent, eloquent, repetitive or otherwise compelling manner. All of these can be helpful in winning belief (i.e., conditioning) on the part of the child and thus setting the stage for successful sexual seduction. In other words, personality is generally found closely associated with conditioned power. However, the appearance and physical capabilities of the individual may also enable him or her to exercise threatening

(condign) power. Through their well-developed personality, priests--especially in relation to small children--can often exercise both the conditioned and condign forms of power.

Property, or money, gives to a person the possibility of purchasing submission through the use of compensatory power. But, at times, when the individual is considered wealthy, others may become submissive in a conditioned way, since they perceive in him or her an aspect of authority and a certainty of purpose which they believe merit deference and compliance with his or her wishes. If a priest has enough money -- and many of them do -- to buy gifts or pay for excursions that children enjoy, experience shows that it is all too easy for him to purchase sexual compliance, especially when the child is poor or deprived of affection or pleasure within his or her home and the context of dysfunctional family life.

Organization is generally established because an exercise of power is needed. Military structures and labor unions, along with the Church, give obvious evidence of this truth. And once an organization is functioning, it is capable of conditioning people to respond through persuasion. Enemies surrender on the battlefield and owners capitulate to strikes that are staged by their employees, when conditioning power is brought to bear in a convincing way. An organization may also have access to condign power, giving it the ability to administer diverse forms of punishment. The Church, for example, has power to excommunicate (and, in the past, to burn a heretic at the stake) and can use the threat of such punishments as leverage to exact compliance with its purposes. Additionally, the Church--like other organizations such as Boeing Aircraft or The International Monetary Fund--has been able, at times, to gain cooperation with its aims by using compensatory power based on its property and perceived wealth.

In one of the most interesting paragraphs in his book, Galbraith cites the Catholic Church as providing one of the most obvious examples of the three sources of power and the three related instruments for exercising it. He writes:

> In earliest Christian days, power originated with the compelling personality of the Savior. Almost immediately an organization, the Apostles, came into being, and in time the Church as an organization became the most influential and durable in all the world. Not the least of its sources of power was its property and the income thus disposed. From the combination of personality (those of the Heavenly Presence and a long line of religious leaders), the property, and, above all, the unique organization came the conditioned belief, the benefices or

> compensation, and the threat of condign punishment either in this world or the next that, in the aggregate, constituted the religious power. Such is the complex of factors in and, in great measure concealed by, that term (power).

All of this power of the Church is often recognized as being vested in priests. Children, especially, are unlikely to view these leaders as distinct in any way from the organization which they officially represent. Consequently, as a result of their identification with this sacred but powerful corporate body, priests have access to power that is at times compensatory, and at other times condign or conditioned. In other words, they can get what they want in many life situations simply because they are "men of the cloth", which to their constituents implies special entitlement. Children, seeing what exceptional deference is displayed by adults toward these men, would naturally find it difficult to say "no" to the priest who strongly requests or demands their sexual compliance. It is usually the persuasive power of the priest along with his highly respected role that draws the child to submit himself or herself, even when the behavior is objectively abusive.

Powerless Elicits Abuse

In Understanding Race, Ethnicity and Power, Elaine Pinderhughes describes how individuals who feel powerless frequently act "in ways that will neutralize their pain with strategies that enable them to turn that powerlessness into a sense of power." Manipulation is one such strategy. Priests who seduce children into complying with their sexual desires--and the same would be true in relation to adult women--are often giving evidence of their own feeling of powerlessness in the face of what they perceive as overwhelming power exercised by the pope, bishops, and sometimes by pastors and even parishioners. In such cases, the abused victim is simply being exploited in an unconscious effort by the clergyman to attain a "sense of power", which Pinderhughes reminds us is critical to the maintenance of "one's mental health."

On the other hand, at times the priest himself may be manipulated into sexual misbehavior by adolescents or adults who behave in sexually provocative ways in order to defend themselves against a pervasive sense of their own powerlessness. To be able to resist these temptations, priests would have to be "comfortable with themselves and with their own power needs", says Pinderhughes. Moreover, "High self-esteem, which we have learned is in part dependent on a clear and positive sense of cultural identity, is needed along with a strong sense of self-differentiation...Only such attributes and capacities will enable (priests) to control the feelings mobilized by the power tactics these clients will use, and to behave appropriately with them," she concludes.

Workshop Provides Remedy

Finally, the foregoing discussion of the abuse of power in instances of sexual abuse, particularly on the part of priests, naturally leads to the question: What can be done to reduce the incidence of sexual abuse by clergy and other ministers? A good answer is provided by the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, which is situated in Seattle, Washington. In a published trainer's manual for their "Workshop on Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship", the authors view prevention of sexual abuse as a matter of preserving ministerial boundaries, and they present their prevention plan in terms of promoting "individual health", which includes both personal health and professional health. Their fundamental assumption is that "ministers who actively maintain their own physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological health are less likely to violate boundaries through sexual misbehavior."

When the Center's writers use the term institutional health, they are speaking of the characteristics of religious institutions which sustain healthy and effective ministries. They observe: "Healthy institutions have an organizational 'climate' in which sexual contact or sexualized behavior toward congregants/staff is unacceptable." Concretely, the Church communicates to clergy and employees, through their policies and procedures, that "such behavior will not be tolerated and will be punished. Built into their structures and routine practices are mechanisms that reduce the opportunities for sexual abuse in ministerial relationships and allow detection of this behavior when it does occur."

The Workshop writers are realistic. They acknowledge that prevention cannot heal the wounds resulting from abuse. Neither can it stop the sexual predators, since they are not likely to change their behavior voluntarily. But it can decrease the chance that ministers will "wander" across boundaries, thereby reducing the sum of sexual abuse within the ministry. The writers recognize that the key to solving the problem is education that (1) teaches ministers to maintain boundaries and to repudiate any justification for "wandering", (2) protects against victimization, and (3) creates an institutional climate where sexual abuse is not tolerated.

The Workshop provides a "Self-Assessment Checklist" designed to help participants become aware of crucial factors that influence their behavior with regard to boundaries. It explains:

> (The) risk of doing harm to those whom we serve or supervise can be considerably reduced through self-knowledge and self-care. If we understand our personal history and its effects on us, our behavior and perceptions are less likely to be shaped by that history. If we are aware of our personal needs and are taking care of those needs in appropriate ways, we are less likely to impose those needs inappropriately upon our ministerial relationships. And if we are aware of the power

implicit in our role and how that power affects those whom we serve and supervise, we are less likely to misuse that power.

Questions such as the following are included in the Workshop and are designed to help participants recognize their needs, particularly in relation to power:

- Do I acknowledge the power inherent in my professional role?
- Am I aware of the effects of that power on those with whom I interact--for example, the attraction that power holds for some people?
- Do I remain alert to my potential for violating boundaries due to that power?
- Am I aware of the consequences to me of my violating the boundaries of my ministerial relationships?

As helpful as the Workshop is to its clergy participants, it perhaps more importantly also serves as a reminder that the misuse of one's sexuality in ministry and the connection between abuse of power and sexual misbehavior are topics for repeated and profound discussion in seminaries where future priests are being educated and trained. Formation personnel and spiritual directors in that setting are positioned strategically to raise the issues of sexuality and power in conversation with every candidate for the priesthood. Bishops and religious superiors should make sure that these guiding men and women are adequately educated about sexuality and trained in the skills that will make profound and personalized discussion of these topics possible in every seminary and house of religious formation.

References:

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