

PARISHES AS VICTIMS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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A few weeks ago I was in a parish whose pastor was publicly charged with sexually abusing a 13-year-old boy. The boy, now a young man, revealed details of an alleged four-year relationship that started with overnights to the priest's camp, lavish gifts, and wrestling. Three years later it progressed to genital fondling and mutual masturbation.

The priest stated publicly that he is innocent. He claimed the alleged victim is emotionally unstable and out to ruin his priesthood. The Statute of Limitations has run out on possible criminal charges but a civil suit is pending. The young man desires a monetary compensation for the trauma that he believes he has suffered.

The media have been reporting every detail of the confrontation between the alleged perpetrator and the accuser. The priest's parish has gone into shock. The pastor was, and still is, deeply loved by the people. His ten years in the parish were filled with many acts of kindness and pastoral sensitivity. Parishioners cannot reconcile the good that he has done with the charge that he was sexually involved with a young boy. They are divided between feelings of affection for the pastor and feelings of disgust and disappointment.

This internal conflict is emotionally paralyzing and many parishioners are feeling increasingly helpless. They are looking for assistance but their pastor is on administrative leave and the recently-appointed temporary administrator is reluctant to take any action. Diocesan lawyers have counseled the Bishop against going to the parish and releasing any information; they have recommended he remain silent for the duration of the legal proceedings. Rumors are flying in the parish and throughout the diocese. For example, someone heard that there are many other victims who have come forward but have not gone public.

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Parishioners are becoming very angry. Some are angry at the pastor; they believe he is guilty and they feel betrayed. Others are angry at the alleged victim for bringing up charges; the victim and his family are being ostracized from the parish. Many are angry at the media for the sensational way the story has been covered. Everyone is angry at the Bishop; they believe he has deserted them in their hour of need. And nobody in the parish knows what is happening....

This scenario is being repeated in scores of parishes throughout the United States. As allegations of priest-child sexual abuse begin to surface in other countries, as they already have, similar disastrous events will take place around the globe.

Increasing Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse Trauma

Before the 1970's, sexual contact between a minor and an adult was rarely called sexual "abuse." At the time, there was little known about the possible psychological trauma caused by such encounters. Many believed the children would soon forget. Several studies said that the proper response to incidents of child sexual abuse was simply not to overreact.

For example, the celebrated Kinsey report on human sexuality stated that most of the sexual advances by adults toward female minors were "not likely to do the child any appreciable harm if the child's parents do not become disturbed" by the abuse.¹ The Kinsey report noted that while 80% of the children who had sexual contacts with adults had been frightened or upset, "in most instances the reported fright was nearer the level that children will show when they see insects, spiders...."²

There were even isolated statements in the literature suggesting that sex between an adult and a minor could have an educative function. The Kinsey report addressed the issue of pre-adolescent boys being sexually involved with a female adult. They believed that "the cases are so few" as to be negligible. They went

on to suggest that such events may have a positive meaning: "Older persons are the teachers of younger people in all matters, including the sexual."³ Since the publication of the Kinsey report, our understanding of the effects of sexual contact between adults and children has changed dramatically.

With the increasingly psychological sensitivity of our society, an increasing openness in dealing with sexual matters, and the burgeoning child rights movement, there has been an explosion in the literature on child sexual abuse. The short-term and long-term traumatic effects associated with incidents of adult-child sexual contact are being documented and effective clinical interventions are being developed. Organizations that promote "consenting" sexual relations between adults and children, like the Rene Guyon Society and the North American Man/Boy Love Association, are increasingly perceived as fringe groups promoting a twisted agenda.

Like the wider society, the Catholic Church in the United States has come to recognize the trauma caused to the victims of child sexual abuse and their families. The American bishops have recognized their responsibility to aid victims of clerical-child sexual abuse. In its November 1992 general meeting, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) passed a resolution in which they promised to "Reach out to the victims and their families and communicate our sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being."

Moreover, as our knowledge of the effects of child sexual abuse grows, it is becoming evident that the damage done by clerical sexual misconduct is affecting a wider population. There has been a recent awareness that the trauma caused by child sexual abuse extends far beyond the immediate victim and the family. When allegations of clerical-child sexual abuse arise, it is becoming apparent that priest's worshipping community is profoundly affected.

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*Increasing Awareness of Trauma to Parishes*⁴

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' (CCCCB) document, *From Pain to Hope*, reported that "groups or institutions felt stigmatized when it was revealed that some of their members had been implicated in incidents of allegations of abuse."⁵ The reputations of these parishes or institutions were damaged, and their operations were placed under a cloud of suspicion. The parishioners themselves felt tarnished.

I know of concerned chancery officials who have telephoned new parish administrators in the wake of allegations of clerical sexual misconduct and were told that the parish is "fine." Similarly, the Winter Commission, which investigated sexual abuse of children by clergy in Newfoundland, found that some Catholic officials denied that harm had come to the parishes whose pastor had been charged.

But the Commission's report refuted such claims: "In certain instances, the view was expressed that the scandal had not had any direct impact on parishioners. This stance, maintained by some clergy and parish officials, is contrary to the evidence provided by individual lay women and men."⁶ When the parishioners feel safe enough to vent their feelings, the trauma emerges.

In Chicago, Cardinal Bernardin's Commission on Child Sexual Abuse found that incidents of clergy sexual misconduct had a negative impact on parishioners. Its report said that "incidents of sexual misconduct with minors, when they become known, also have a severely negative impact on the parish communities where priests have served."⁷

The Canadian bishops' document pointed out that it is important to intervene in affected parishes. One of the recommendations of *From Pain to Hope* is to "manifest particular pastoral care for the suffering of the parish community when one of its priests is accused or convicted of child sexual abuse."⁸

Nancy Hopkins, who has worked with Protestant parishes with similar prob-

lems, emphasized the importance of early intervention. She noted, "Intervention with the congregation is, therefore, as crucial as with the primary victims, the pastor, and his family."⁹ In the same article, Hopkins made an even stronger assertion: "I am convinced that to do nothing with the congregation is to invite the forces of darkness to take over."¹⁰

The Traumatic Effects on Parishes

A parish whose pastor has been charged with child sexual abuse is almost always divided. There will be divisions in the parish leadership. There will be divisions and conflicts within the parish itself.

Some parishioners who have personally been affected by sexual abuse in their own family may react very strongly; the allegations will reopen old wounds.

For others, the pastor has been a source of blessing for them: he may have visited them when they were sick or baptized their children. These people are more likely to receive the allegations with incredulity.

People's responses will be affected by a number of factors including their relationship to the priest and their feelings about the priesthood in general. Parishioners who have become part of the priest's inner circle will react differently than the occasional church-goer who cannot remember the pastor's name. Similarly, parishioners who have come to revere the priesthood and the Catholic church will respond very differently than others who have become embittered in their religion.

Parishioners' reactions will also be affected by their stage of faith development. For theorist James Fowler, those who are in the earlier stages of faith development, a "conventional" faith, have difficulty distinguishing symbols of the divine, such as the priesthood, with the divine itself. For these people, religious symbols "are not separable from the what they symbolize."¹¹ Therefore, they will expect a priest to be a uniquely holy person and they will not be able to entertain

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the notion that he may have sexually abused a child.

People in the earlier stages of faith development are especially likely to have emotional and spiritual needs for the pastor to be innocent. They may be the most vociferous in claiming that the priest has been unjustly accused. To accept that the allegations might be true precipitates an internal crisis in them that challenges their underlying spiritual and psychological beliefs. This is a particularly vulnerable group and requires special, patient attention. Some of these may become so disillusioned that they end up leaving the Catholic church altogether.

A few other parishioners will be in Fowler's later stages. They have already come to recognize that divine symbols point to God but are not divine in themselves. Therefore, they accept that a priest can be a source of grace and a channel to the divine, yet have very human faults, including the disease of pedophilia. For this group, the allegations will still be upsetting, but less likely to precipitate a crisis of faith.

The emotions of parishioners in affected parishes will run the gamut from anger, disappointment, disgust, betrayal, disbelief and shock to sadness, grief and compassion.

Long-Term Effects

Some of the possible long-term effects have been documented in a study that I conducted with the support of *Twenty-Third Publications* in Mystic, CT. Roman Catholics in the United States and Canada were randomly selected from *Twenty-Third Publications's* mailing list. The respondents included 1,013 laity of whom 87% were active lay ministers in their churches, e.g., lectors, religious education directors and Eucharistic ministers.¹² Thus, the overwhelming majority of the sample included our most active and committed lay people.

The 1,013 active lay Catholics in the sample were separated into three groups: Group 1 consisted of those who had no awareness of a priest in their

diocese being charged with child sexual abuse; Group 2 included those who knew of a priest in their diocese who had been so accused; and Group 3 was made up of those whose own pastor had been charged. The differences between these three groups regarding their trust and confidence in the priesthood and the Church were striking.¹³

TABLE 1¹⁴

SURVEY STATEMENT	PERCENT AGREEMENT		
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
"I believe the church will safeguard the children entrusted to its care."	50%	38%	28%
"I would send my child to a Catholic summer camp."	78%	73%	65%
"When a new priest arrives in our parish, I wonder if he is someone we can trust." (% disagreement)	59%	48%	44%
"When someone wants to be a priest today, I wonder if he has sexual problems." (% disagreement)	81%	73%	58%
"I trust the Catholic church to take care of problems with its own clergy."	53%	33%	25%
"I look to the Church to provide guidance on issues of human sexuality."	77%	72%	66%
"I look to Catholic priests to provide moral leadership."	95%	91%	88%
"If I had a son, I would be pleased if he wanted to become a priest."	81%	68%	57%
"I support the requirement that priests live a celibate life."	32%	23%	18%
"Overall, I am satisfied with the priests that we have in the church today."	69%	50%	34%
"Overall, I am satisfied with the Catholic Church today."	63%	47%	34%

For each of the survey questions listed in Table 1, there was a marked decline in confidence in the Church from Group 1 to Group 2 to Group 3. Thus, the laity's confidence in the Church and the priesthood was the highest when there

were no public incidents of priest-child sexual abuse. When a priest in the diocese had been charged, their confidence dropped. When their own pastor had been charged, it dropped even further.

In the wake of clerical-child sexual abuse, parishioners are more suspecting of priests. They are more likely to wonder if he has sexual problems or if they can trust him. They are less trusting of the Church with their children. They are less trusting of the Church to take care of problems with its clergy. They are less likely to look to the priesthood or to the Church for moral leadership, especially on issues of sexuality. Their support for celibacy drops and they are less likely to encourage a priestly vocation in their own children.

Perhaps most surprising is the drop in overall satisfaction with the priesthood and the Catholic Church. When the laity are not aware of any cases of priest-child sexual abuse, their overall support is relatively high, 63% to 69%. But when their own pastor is charged, it drops to 34%, almost in half!

The survey data demonstrate that, when a priest is charged with child sexual abuse, the resulting erosion of trust and confidence in the priesthood and Church occurs throughout the diocese. *The data also show that the harm is most acute in the parish where the priest was assigned.*

The Catholic priest continues to exercise a pivotal role in the life of a parish community. If he exercises his pastorate well, he is a blessing for the people. If he has significant personal problems that lead to scandal, the effects can be devastating.

The Second Injury

There are several significant factors that affect how traumatic an incident of sexual abuse will be for a victim. The longer the duration of the abuse and the more aggression that is used, the more traumatic the abuse is likely to be. Moreover, abuse by fathers or trusted father-figures has been shown to cause more

serious psychic damage in victims than with other types of perpetrators.¹⁵ And it has been shown that the reaction of the people to whom the victim first reveals the abuse is similarly important.

In his summary of the research, Finkelhor concluded that "negative parental reactions serve to aggravate trauma in sexually abused children."¹⁶ If the victim feels ignored or, even worse, blamed for the abuse, a phenomenon sometimes called "the second injury" is likely to occur. The original acts of sexual abuse cause the "first injury." The negative effects of the victim being ignored or blamed exacerbate the original trauma and inflict the "second injury."

When a pastor is charged with child sexual abuse, his parish responds as a victim does. It, too, has been traumatized and it, too, needs a sympathetic ear. If an affected parish's trauma is ignored or if they are blamed for the abuse, it will suffer the "second injury." In addition to being upset by the pastor's alleged actions, parishioners are traumatized by the lack of manifest concern for their pain.

My survey data suggests that affected parishes have been suffering such a "second injury."

TABLE 2¹⁷

SURVEY STATEMENT	PERCENT <u>DISAGREEMENT</u>		
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
"The Catholic church is dealing with the problem of sexual abuse directly."	36%	60%	70%
"The church's current response to the sexual abuse of children by priests is adequate."	43%	66%	80%
"I have been kept adequately informed by the church about child sexual abuse."	64%	71%	80%

Table 2 reports that many active Catholics did not believe the Church is dealing with the problem of sexual abuse directly, nor did they feel the Church's current response is adequate, and they did not feel they have been kept adequately

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informed.

What is striking about Table 2 is how strong the negative sentiment was among those who had some first-hand experience of a priest in their diocese being charged. The majority of Group 2 were dissatisfied with the church support they received in the wake of allegations. This dissatisfaction was even stronger among those whose pastor has been accused, i.e., Group 3. Fully 70% to 80% of Group 3 did not feel that the Church had responded adequately to their needs. It is likely that they suffered the "second injury." Privately, many have confided that they felt abandoned.

In our survey responses, I found that people were angry and disappointed with the priests who had molested young children. Catholics, like their peers in society, acknowledge child sexual abuse as a heinous crime. But an equal source of disappointment and anger was the perceived lack of responsiveness by the church. As one Catholic said, "I'm more angry at the church than I am at [the priest]."

Parishes suffer deeply when their pastors are charged with sexual misconduct. Whether they are able to reveal it to inquiring church officials or not, or whether they are fully conscious of it or not, parishes need help, and they need it quickly.

Parishioners Want Information

First of all, people want and need information. Many times, they receive little from church officials or the parish leadership. The diocesan response to inquiries is often "No comment" or a brief statement is read. To obtain information, parishioners are forced to rely on rumors and the secular media.

Many times diocesan attorneys recommend that church officials say nothing while civil and/or criminal proceedings are possible or underway. This may be good legal advice but it cripples the pastoral leadership that the Bishop should exercise in

a crisis. The November 1992 resolution passed by the American bishops recognized the people's need for information, "Within the confines of respect for the privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with members of the community."

Diocesan leaders cannot reveal information that would prejudice legal proceedings nor can they speak of confidential details that rightfully remain private. Nevertheless, there is much that can be spoken by church leaders to stop destructive rumors, to correct false impressions given by secular sources, and to allay unreasonable fears. Using both legal and pastoral advice, it is possible for diocesan leaders to chart a course of action that is legally prudent yet pastorally sensitive to the needs of affected Catholic communities.

Parishioners who are forced to rely on the secular media for information often receive a superficial and sensational understanding of the church's response. It is difficult for the media to present the complexities of these cases. The secular media reinforce the parishioners' feelings that the church is covering up the problem and has abandoned them.

When a priest has been charged with sexual misconduct, parishioners want and need information, and they need to hear it directly from church officials.

Authoritative Presence Required

In addition to the need for information, parishioners whose pastor has been publicly charged with child sexual abuse need strong leadership. In most cases, an accused pastor will be temporarily removed from his pastorate and placed on administrative leave. The absence of leadership and the rumors of allegations of misconduct create confusion and turmoil. In such a crisis, the need for leadership becomes acute.

Chancery officials may be reluctant to intervene in such parishes. They

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often do not know how to help the parish. They might be aware the parish is struggling, but they often feel inadequate to the task. Chancery officials have sometimes said, "If the parish wants our help, they will ask." In addition, as noted previously, diocesan attorneys may be advocating silence.

On the other hand, parishes may not ask for help from the chancery but usually expect an offer to be forthcoming. When the offer is not made, there is considerable resentment ("Why didn't they come to help us? They must not care about us, or they simply can't face the problem.")

As a result, the parish is left in a leadership vacuum. The members of the parish leadership are sharply divided and confused, and they are likely to focus their anger on the diocese. If a temporary administrator is moved into the parish, he or she can be of some help. But what people want is for the bishop and his staff to be a direct, concrete presence during this difficult time. The people's need for leadership is clear, and they expect the hierarchy to respond.

It is understandable that one's natural inclination would be to shy away from the painful task of discussing clerical sexual misconduct with the perpetrator's parish. But people want to know the steps that are being taken by the diocese. They want to know that their anger, confusion and pain are heard. They want to know that, at this critical moment, the bishop personally is in charge.

Some bishops have made announcements from the parish pulpit. Others have offered a mass of healing in the parish. Still others have sent personal messages via an episcopal vicar.

In the early stages, the bishop may have few answers or can say little. However, his authoritative presence communicates the most important message: he is concerned with the parishioners' pain and wants to help.

Healing Always Needed

This paper has outlined the need for information and for leadership in victimized parishes. There is a third and obvious need: the need for healing.

Some time ago I went to a parish whose pastor had been charged with sexual abusing several adolescent boys. The cases had gone to trial in a civil suit and were eventually settled out of court. The priest was sent into treatment.

During the first night we gathered, there was the usual anger at the priest and the diocese. Many asked, "How could the diocese send in a priest when there had been rumors that something was wrong with him in his previous parish?" Some defended the priest and said that he had done a lot of good. A few wondered if he really was guilty; they distrusted the legal system. There was an undercurrent of guilt, especially among the parents; they wondered if they were not somehow to blame for what had taken place.

The parish leadership complained that the congregation had become dysfunctional. People did not trust the diocese or its new priests. It was difficult to find volunteers for parish projects. Many had become uncooperative and cynical. The parish was splintering into different groups and some had simply left.

The odd thing was that the priest-perpetrator had been charged and left the parish almost ten years ago. The subject of what had taken place had never been raised. For a number of reasons, the new priests and the diocese had never been able to address the issue. Because it had not been addressed, the trauma did not go away, not even after ten years. Rather, it became like a cancer eating away the vitality of the parish.

As noted previously, decades ago many people believed that children who were subject to sexual abuse would "forget." If there was some short-term upset, this would quickly pass. Pastoral experience and clinical research have proven otherwise. It is the same with victimized parishes. The pain and hurt do not go

away unless a healing touch is brought to the wound.

There are several persons who need healing in the wake of clergy-child sexual abuse. First and foremost, the children who were victimized are in need of our immediate solicitude. In June of 1992, as president of the NCCB, Archbishop Pilarczyk said, "The protection of the child is and will continue to be our first concern."

The victim's family members may also need assistance. They will be grappling with how to understand what has happened. The pain and trauma caused by such events has split apart even healthy families. With assistance, this need not occur.

In addition to the victim and the victim's family, the church must be concerned about the perpetrator. There is little doubt that perpetrators are suffering from some type of mental dysfunction. While the moral and legal consequences of his actions cannot be ignored, the offender is in need of healing.

The alleged abuser might also be offered pastoral assistance from the diocese. More than one priest has either committed or attempted suicide after allegations have arisen. A priest-mentor and/or mental health professional could provide ongoing support when allegations surface. Most often, the accused longs for direct contact with an understanding and compassionate bishop or religious superior.

As the church is slowly learning about child sexual abuse and the devastation it causes both victims and their families, church officials are becoming more effective in dealing with the victims, the victims' families, and the perpetrators. While the media still broadcast news of the failures, many more cases are being successfully handled.

But what is only now emerging is a general appreciation of the need for an *action plan* on how to help parishes after their priests have been charged. Diagram 1 depicts the widening circle of devastation caused by clerical sexual misconduct.

The ripples extend far beyond the injured child and family. It must be recognized that the parish and the wider church are also victims.

[insert diagram 1]

Action Plan for Parishes

This article points out the short-term and long-term trauma caused to parishes when their clergy have been charged with sexual misconduct with minors. In particular, it documents the resulting decline in trust and confidence in the priesthood and church among active Catholics. Contrary to popular wisdom, I do not believe that this erosion of trust and confidence must necessarily follow incidents of clergy sexual misconduct.

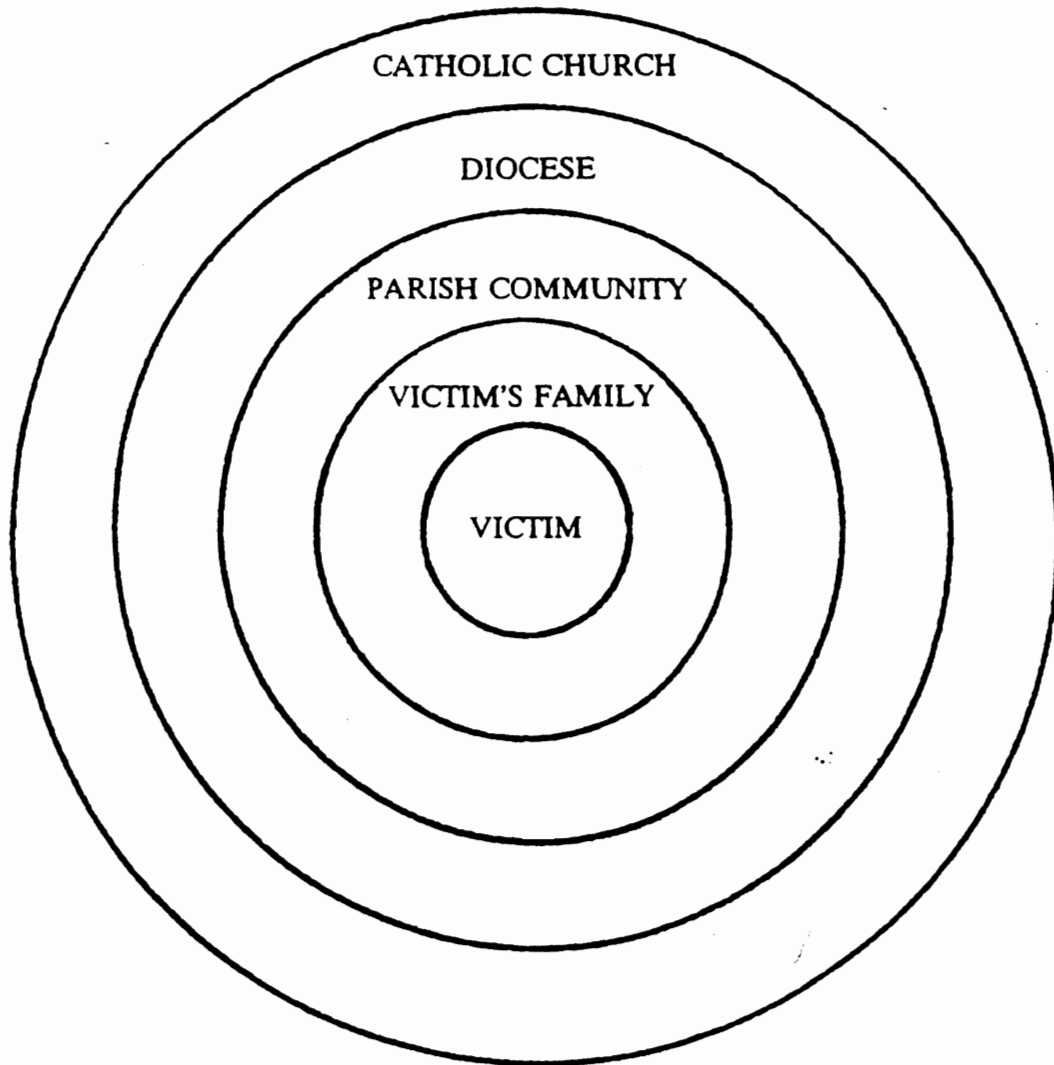
If church leadership took an aggressive, direct, and open response to the problem, I believe it would affirm the church's spiritual leadership in the minds of the people. They would perceive the mental illness that spawns pedophilia and ephebophilia as an exceptional occurrence in an otherwise healthy and concerned presbyterate. This could turn a crisis of confidence into an affirmation of support.

This aggressive action plan must necessarily include an action plan for parishes. The needs of the parishes, previously mentioned in this article, include (1) information, (2) an authoritative presence, and (3) healing. As noted earlier, the Bishop or his designed representative can be that necessary authoritative presence to the affected parish. To provide additional information and to begin the healing

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DIAGRAM 1

VICTIMS OF CLERICAL SEXUAL MISCONDUCT



process, the diocese may want to make available the services of qualified and trained pastoral, psychological, and legal professionals.

Parish Assistance Team

A small team of professionals at the diocesan level should be trained and be "on call." This team might include a public relations person, a mental health professional, a civil lawyer, and a pastoral person. Whenever a situation of clerical misconduct arises, chancery officials would contact the parish and ask the leadership if they would like the assistance of this team.

The public relations person would help the parish leadership deal with the media, which may deluge the parish with requests for statements and interviews. He or she might assist the parish leadership in drafting a public statement and in identifying one member of the parish leadership to interact with the media.

The mental health professional and pastoral person might hold listening sessions or parish meetings. They would schedule educational programs to provide information on child sexual abuse. They would help the parishioners process their hurt, anger, and disappointment. They would also make referrals to psychotherapists and pastoral counselors when indicated. For example, public allegations of clerical-child sexual abuse may stir up old wounds in parishioners who themselves were sexually abused in childhood; they should be referred to a mental health professional.

In addition to the public relations and mental health professionals, the Parish Assistance Team should include a civil lawyer if the accused priest were brought up on civil or criminal charges. The lawyer would provide general information to the parishioners on the legal process and any discussable information related to the case.

Parish Assistance Teams are already in place in a few dioceses. It has been

edifying to discover that many fine professionals are willing to donate their time for such service. They only need to be asked!

For example, under Bishop Marshall's personal guidance, the Diocese of Springfield has established a Parish Reconciliation/Healing Team and outlined procedures for the team to follow when intervening in affected parishes. When a public allegation occurs, the Bishop activates the team to lead the parish in the process of healing.

The Diocese of Springfield's written policy stresses the need for a swift response. The policy states, "It is imperative, therefore, that a process of reconciliation and healing be initiated as soon as possible" and "The Parish Reconciliation/Healing Team should meet without delay."

Empowering Parish Leadership

The Springfield policy includes an important realization: "The Parish Reconciliation/Healing Team begins the process of healing and aids the parish leadership in continuing and maintaining this process." The Parish Assistance Team is not designed to take over the leadership of the parish. Rather, its task is to provide necessary professional help at a critical moment. But the ultimate goal is to empower parish leadership to take charge of its own healing process.

Victims of child sexual abuse suffer in many ways. One of the most debilitating effects is often an enduring sense of helplessness. Through their victimization, these children may come to believe that they are powerless and cannot defend themselves. This is one of the reasons why victims of child sexual abuse are at greater risk for being abused as adults. They were "taught" to be passive, powerless victims and continue in this role until an intervention in their life teaches them otherwise.

It is the same with victimized parishes. The parish mentioned previously, whose pastor had been charged with sexual misconduct ten years ago, was not

able to move out of its stance of learned helplessness. They remained in this stance for ten years waiting for someone to come from the outside to help them.

The process that I used with this and other affected parishes is first to meet in a one-day session with the parish leadership including the parish council and parish staff. After allowing them an opportunity to vent their feelings, we work together to establish a series goals and objectives on how they plan to deal with this crisis. After this session with the leadership, educational and interactive sessions are scheduled with the wider parish.

My goal is to assist affected parishes in recognizing that they can shake off the role of helpless victim and can work together in their designing and implementing their own healing process. Once they are so empowered, the parish is well on its way to a stronger and healthier future.

As one Canadian sister wrote in her survey response:

Our pastor was convicted of sexually abusing boys.
Our parishioners were compassionate and understanding
of his weakness. It was edifying, and it brought our
parish together in prayer for him and for his victims.

Competing Rights

A difficult situation arises when the allegations of sexual misconduct have not been made public. The pastor has been placed on administrative leave and perhaps is undergoing psychological evaluation. The allegations appear to be founded but have not been substantiated in a court of law. Should the diocese make a public statement?

Parishioners are aware that something unusual is happening. The priest usually leaves the parish suddenly and may have told people that he is leaving because of "medical reasons" or for "personal reasons." Members of the parish suspect there is something amiss.

There is no obvious right answer to the question of making the allegations

public because there are a number of competing and contradictory rights. Canon 220 states: "No one is permitted to damage unlawfully the good reputation which another person enjoys nor to violate the right of another to protect his or her privacy." This canon recognizes the right of each person to privacy and to a good reputation. One could argue that it is the accused priest's right that allegations remain confidential and not be revealed by church authorities.

However, the priest's right to privacy and a good reputation are not absolute. The good of the church can supersede the rights of the individual person. Canon 383 states, "In the exercise of his pastoral office, a diocesan bishop is to show he is concerned with all the Christian faithful who are committed to his care...." One might argue that it is ultimately to the good of the parish community and for the healing of other victims that the allegations become public knowledge.

Canon 220 includes the phrase "to damage unlawfully." It could be argued that revealing allegations of clerical sexual misconduct is not "unlawfully" damaging the priest's reputation since the common good may require it. In addition, if the priest has done something illegal and immoral, i.e., sexually abused a minor, one may reason that his right to privacy and a good reputation are mitigated by this transgression.¹⁸

Canon 220 applies to all Christians. It should be added that the priest has the additional responsibility of performing a public ministry in the church. As a public figure given a sacred trust, one might reason that the parish community has a special right to know about substantial violations of the trust they have put in him. Do they not have a right to know why their spiritual leader has suddenly left?

If the diocesan leadership makes a public announcement of the allegations of clerical sexual misconduct, perhaps some people will be scandalized by the allegations who otherwise would not have been. But if no announcement is made, the parishioners will wonder what is happening, they may feel uncared for by the

diocese, and rumors will circulate. As one lay minister from Pennsylvania who completed our survey wrote, "We have had two priests in our parish over the last three years who were here one day, packed and gone the next. No explanation given. Rumors flew."

In the final analysis, unfounded rumors may be more damaging to the priest's reputation and the spiritual life of the parish than directly and honestly revealing the truth.

Allegations Sometimes Secret

Some pastoral situations are easier calls. If the allegations are about to surface in the media, an immediate public statement by the diocese is warranted. This would be the situation if the allegations were soon to be a matter of public record in the legal system. This would also be true if a victim were planning to release a statement to the press. If the allegations will inevitably reach the public forum, it is better that the diocese make the first announcement.

It would also be a simpler decision for the diocese if victims' families or victims who are now adults are adamant about wanting the situation to remain confidential or if the allegations of sexual misconduct appear to be highly dubious. Unless civil reporting requirements dictate otherwise, it would seem appropriate for the diocese to handle these cases discreetly.

The tough call is when a victim either does not object to the allegations becoming public or desires that the diocese makes a public revelation. If the allegations of sexual abuse appear to have some merit, the diocese is caught between competing rights. Should an announcement be made or not?

There is no obvious answer. Victims' groups lobby for public announcement. Church officials often believe that maintaining confidentiality is the greater good. Each situation calls for a prudent pastoral judgment.

However, instead of all the burden, and the possible public blame, falling

only on the shoulders of the Bishop, I recommend that a team of professionals review each situation and present a recommendation to the Ordinary. This group might be the same team of lay professionals that most dioceses' have constituted as a review board on clerical sexual misconduct cases.

If the review board recommends that a case be dealt with discreetly, this would make the Bishop less open to public criticism if the case eventually becomes known. It would also take some of the increasingly ponderous burden of clerical sexual misconduct cases off his shoulders.

In making a decision regarding public announcements, I offer the following guidelines for making such a judgment:

Err on the Side of the Victims. If the decision comes down to protecting victims or protecting the accused, and the allegations appear to have substance, we should err on the side of the victims. In each situation there will be competing rights. However, I believe the church has a special responsibility to come to the aid of victims.

Better to Hear Bad News from the Church. When the parents of a family have bad news, such as an impending divorce, it is better for the children to hear the news from their parents than to learn it on the streets. In a similar way, it is better for the parishioners to hear about allegations of clerical sexual misconduct from church officials than to read about such allegations in the newspaper.

Both of these guidelines suggest that the church tell the truth to the parishioners. It is worth repeating the words of the November 1992 resolution of the American bishops: "Within the confines of respect for the privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with members of the community."

I think it would be an exceptional case if secrecy were the best course of action, particularly if the allegations were substantiated. However, if the allegations remained questionable and the alleged victim asked for anonymity, a prudent

silence might be most appropriate.

Silver Lining in a Dark Cloud?

One Canadian mother revealed that the pastor of her parish had telephoned one morning at 3:00am and asked for her son to be sent to the rectory to assist the priest. She dutifully woke her son who went to the rectory where he was sexually molested by the pastor.

The Winter Commission report, which investigated incidents of clergy-child sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Newfoundland, repeated one of the testimonies it received:

The power, status, prestige, and lack of accountability at the parish level in particular, may have created a climate in which the insecure, power-hungry, or the deviant believed they could exploit and abuse victims with immunity from discovery or punishment.¹⁹

In the past, some Catholics have blindly trusted their priests. While trust between priest and parishioner is essential for a successful ministry, an atmosphere of blind trust does not hold a priest sufficiently accountable for his actions. A trust that is blind to the presence of human failings in a priest also makes parishioners excessively vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as it did for the family that sent its son to the rectory at 3:00am.

While public awareness of clergy-child sexual abuse has caused much trauma to affected parishes and the wider church community, it also has the potential of being a positive force promoting a deeper understanding of faith and a more mature response to the person of the priest. In the earlier stages of faith in Fowler's model, people confuse the symbol with the reality: they have difficulty reconciling the humanity of the priest with the sanctity of the Lord he symbolizes. My study of Catholics suggests that parishioners are now more willing to recognize the flawed humanity of the priests they receive into their parishes.

Public allegations of clerical sexual misconduct have challenged Catholics to move to a deeper faith. Awareness of these allegations is also likely to make people somewhat less vulnerable to being abused in the future by clerics with problems. Catholics are challenged to develop a well-formed, mature trust in the sacred office of the priest and yet to hold the man in the office accountable for his actions.

A little skepticism is a healthy thing.

Signs of Progress

An increasing number of bishops are recognizing and responding to the trauma of parishes after allegations of clergy sexual misconduct. One of the first was Bishop Harry Flynn, formerly from the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana.

In 1984, Father Gilbert Gauthe became the first priest in the United States to receive national public exposure as a child molester. The Diocese of Lafayette was assaulted with months of devastating national media attention. The media explored the details of Father Gauthe's behavior, revealed the names of other suspected priest-perpetrators, and charged the church with a cover-up.

The court system gave Father Gauthe twenty years in prison at hard labor, without parole. The diocese lost millions of dollars in lawsuits. Parishioners were devastated. Eventually, the church sent Bishop Flynn to Lafayette.

Bishop Flynn made it a personal priority to deal with the trauma that clergy involvement in sexual misconduct caused to the diocese. He met, and continues to meet, personally with victims. He visited affected parishes. He offered mass and spoke to parishioners directly about the problem. He publicly announced his willingness to meet with anyone who had been victimized and encouraged victims of clergy misconduct to come forward. He offers an annual mass in the cathedral for all victims of violence and abuse.

Bishop Flynn has the added gift of being able to understand the anger of

victims and the people. He is able to listen compassionately and not become defensive as they vent their anger at the church. Throughout the exchange, Bishop Flynn maintains a steady pastoral response of care and concern. He has been a healing presence.

The Catholic church in the United States is coming to realize that a priest who sexually molests children has a mental illness. He needs to confront his illness and accept assistance; his goal is to find recovery. We recognize that victims of sexual abuse must learn to face and overcome their trauma; their goal is to move from being victims to becoming survivors. The church is starting to offer them support. But the parish community is also a victim. By confronting the problem openly and directly, with assistance from the bishop and his staff, it too can become a survivor.

These goals are not beyond reach. The pastoral and professional skills are available. Stories like those of Bishop Flynn and the Diocese of Lafayette have shown us what can be done. What remains for us is to recognize the wider trauma of clergy sexual misconduct and to mobilize our resources.

Clergy involvement in child sexual abuse has been a source of declining confidence in the church. It need not be so. If we are able to maintain a steady pastoral response of care and concern while we face this tragedy directly, we can affirm the age-old confidence that people have had in the presence of Christ in the Catholic church.

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NOTES

- ¹ Kinsey, A.C. et al. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1953, p. 122.
- ² Ibid., p. 121.
- ³ Kinsey, A.C. et al. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1948, p. 167.
- ⁴ Portions of this paper were excerpted from an article by Stephen J. Rossetti in *Human Development Magazine*, Winter 1993, no. four, Volume Fourteen, pp. 15-20. Subscriptions to *Human Development* can be obtained by writing directly to *Human Development*, PO Box 3000, Dept. HD, Denville, NJ 07834.
- ⁵ Canadian Conference of Catholics Bishops (CCCB). *From Pain to Hope*. A report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Child Sexual Abuse. Ottawa, Ontario: CCCB, 1992, p. 63.
- ⁶ Winter, G, N. Kenny, E. MacNeil, F. O'Flaherty, and J. Scott. *The Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy*, Vol. 1, St. John's, Newfoundland: Archdiocese of St. John's, 1990, p. 124.
- ⁷ Dempsey, J. Q., J.R. Gorman, J.P. Madden, A.P. Spilly. *The Cardinal's Commission on Clerical Sexual Misconduct With Minors: Report to Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archdiocese of Chicago*. Chicago: Chicago Catholic Publications, 1992, p. 7.
- ⁸ *From Pain to Hope*, p. 50.
- ⁹ Hopkins, Nancy. "Congregational Intervention When the Pastor has Committed Sexual Misconduct." *Pastoral Psychology*, 39, no. 4 (1991): 247.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 251.
- ¹¹ Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981, p. 163.
- ¹² This survey was conducted in March and April of 1992. Of the 7,201 surveys sent out to a random sampling of *Twenty-Third Publications* mailing list, 1,810 surveys were returned for a response rate of 25.13%. Of the 1,810 respondents, 1,013 were members of the laity.
- ¹³ These statistics were originally reported in the September and October 1992 issues of *Today's Parish Magazine* published by *Twenty-Third Publications*. The sample sizes of the three groups were as follows: Group 1 = 349; Group 2 = 545; and

Group 3 = 98. These numbers do not add up to the entire group of 1,013 laity because of miscellaneous and unusable responses.

¹⁴An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted on each of the survey statements in Table 1 comparing the three group means. In each case, the group means were statistically significantly different in the hypothesized direction. The probabilities were all less than .002 ($p < .002$) except for the statement "I look to the Church to provide guidance on issues of human sexuality" in which case $p = .0338$.

¹⁵Browne, Angela and Finkelhor, David, "Initial and Long-Term Effects: A Review of the Research," in Finkelhor, D. et. al. *A Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, pp. 143-179.

It is likely that a priest in whom the victim and/or the victim's family trusts would fall into the Finkelhor's category of "father-figure." Thus, abuse by a priest would likely be especially traumatic.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁷An ANOVA was conducted on each of the three survey statements in Table 2 comparing the three group means. Again, the group means were significantly different in the hypothesized direction. In each case, $p < .001$.

¹⁸My thanks to Rev. John Beal, J.C.D., for his advice on the application of Canon Law.

¹⁹Winter, G.A., O'Flaherty, F., Kenny, N.P., MacNeil, E., and Scott, J.A. *The Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy*. St. John's, Newfoundland: Archdiocese of St. John's, 1990, Vol III, p. 14.

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