

2.2 SUMMARY RESULTS: PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF YOUTHS UNDER 18 BY CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND DEACONS

A paramount concern for all involved with the study has been the determination of the prevalence of the problem in the Catholic Church in the United States. The survey responses make it clear that the problem was indeed widespread and affected more than 95% of dioceses and approximately 60% of religious communities. Of the 195 dioceses and eparchies that participated in the study, all but seven have reported that allegations of sexual abuse of youths under the age of 18 have been made against at least one priest serving in ecclesiastical ministry in that diocese or eparchy. Of the 140 religious communities that submitted surveys, all but 30 reported at least one allegation against a religious priest who was a member of that community.

Researchers asked each diocese, eparchy and religious community to provide the total number of priests who were active, or serving in ministry, between 1950 and 2002 so that the number of the accused could be presented as a part of an overall total. In our effort to understand the scope and distribution of the problem for the dioceses and eparchies, researchers collected information on the region, a geographical division of the Catholic Church, the number of Catholics per diocese and the number of parishes per diocese. Dioceses and eparchies were asked to indicate these numbers by choosing one of ten equal ranges for the number of Catholic communicants and the number of parishes. The range, i.e., 88,000 – 120,000 or 121,000 – 170,000, etc. in Catholic population, were used to ensure confidentiality of each study participant. Religious communities were grouped into ten equal groups by their total membership and clerical membership, as reported in the Official Catholic Directory 2002. These different ways of looking at the scope of the problem were used to examine the extent of sexual abuse of youths under 18 by Catholic priests and deacons.

- Dioceses and eparchies reported that allegations of child sexual abuse had been made against 4,692 priests and deacons for incidents that took place while these men were serving in ecclesiastical. Individual survey forms were submitted for 4,557 of these priests.
- Religious communities reported that allegations of sexual abuse had been made against 647 clerics who were members of their communities. Dioceses reported additional religious priests, for a study total of 929 religious priests.
- When the 143 priests who were the subject of allegations in more than one diocese or religious community are counted as a single individual, the total number of Catholic priests and deacons in the United States who have been accused of sexual abuse of children is 4,392.
- When dioceses are grouped by the fourteen geographical regions of the Church, the average percent of all incardinated priests in that region's dioceses to have been accused of sexual abuse is consistent: all regions averaged between 3% and 6% of priests accused.
- If the number of priests in a religious community who have had allegations made against them is presented as a percentage of all priest members of that community between 1950 and 2002, the percentage accused of child sexual abuse is 2.7%.

Even before the calculation of an estimated percentage of all priests and deacons is attempted, the consistency of the findings in dioceses across the United States is remarkable: whether region, number of Catholic communicants or number of parishes is used to array the dioceses, the results show the allegations of sexual abuse have been made against 2.5% to 7% of diocesan priests. Similarly, whether religious priests are ranked by overall membership or clerical membership, the percent of priests in the community who have been accused ranges from 1% to 3%, or approximately half of that of the diocesan priests.

To estimate the percentage of all priests in ecclesiastical ministry between 1950 and 2002 who have been the subject of allegations requires a reliable overall total of priests in ministry during that time period. This calculation was done two different ways – first by using the data collected through the Diocesan and Religious Order Profiles, and then by using the estimates produced by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate¹. These different methods both yielded the same statistic: approximately 4% of Catholic priests and deacons in active ministry between 1950 and 2002 have been accused of the sexual abuse of a child under the age of 18.

Surveys for 90% of the priests and deacons reported to have had allegations of child sexual abuse included the year of ordination. If the yearly ordination totals for diocesan priests accused are compared to an overall number of diocesan priests ordained in that year, the percentages range from a maximum of almost 10% in 1970, decreasing to 8% in 1980 and to fewer than 4% in 1990.

These prevalence estimates alone do not describe the extent of the problem of sexual abuse. Another way to understand the extent of the problem is to ask how many incidents of sexual abuse were alleged to occur each year of the study period or, alternatively, to ask how many priests were accused in each year. This distribution of alleged abuse events over time shows the pattern of the reported sexual abuse. When the incidents recorded in the surveys are tallied for each year of occurrence (of each incident), the resulting figure shows that 75% of the events were alleged to occur between 1960 and 1984. When this result is considered together with the declining percentage of priests ordained in each year who have been accused of sexual abuse, it presents a more positive picture.

The prevalence statistics do not fully capture the decline in the number of new allegations being made against priests and deacons. Before any allegation of sexual abuse can be made, the person making the allegation must first understand the behavior experienced to be inappropriate and then sense that it is abusive. The social sensibility about what acts are inappropriate sexual behavior and how these acts are abusive has changed markedly between 1950 and 2002.

¹ Bryan T. Froehle, "Numbers of Priests in the United States 1960 – 1996" (Working Paper, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 1997).