

## Clericalism, Religious Duress and its Psychological Impact on Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse

Marianne Benkert · Thomas P. Doyle

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**Abstract** Religious duress is a unique kind of threat and constraint involuntarily experienced by some members of the Roman Catholic Church as a result of religious indoctrination and training. Fear, awe and respect for the clergy foster the development and actualization of *religious duress*. This phenomenon can seriously impede a person's capacity to accurately perceive and evaluate abusive actions perpetrated on them by clergy. This constraint poses an impediment to emotional and spiritual development. Internalized religious duress confuses and psychologically overwhelms such individuals and renders them incapable of absorbing their sexual trauma. The consequent feelings of numbness and immobility distort the perception of reality. It then becomes impossible for the individual to act in a manner that would protect and promote emotional growth and spiritual well being.

**Keywords** Clergy · Sexual abuse · Duress · Clericalism · Development

### Introduction

Sexual abuse of minors or other vulnerable persons by clergy is not an issue that can be limited in its scope to the destructive actions of dysfunctional clerics. Clergy victims experience a range of effects that are common to all victims of sexual assault, harassment or abuse. They also experience effects that are unique because of the culture in which the abuse occurred. This culture, commonly referred to as the "clerical culture," exerts a powerful conscious and subconscious influence on church members and on secular society in general. It often determines the victim's immediate and short-term reaction to the actual abuse. This culture also shapes the community response to the abuse. The experience of the past 20 plus years has shown that the church culture actively supports the clergy-perpetrator

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M. Benkert  
2825 Ridgeway Row, LaJolla, CA, 92037, USA  
e-mail: mbsipe@san.rr.com

T. P. Doyle (✉)  
9700 Woodland Glen Ct., Vienna, VA 22182, USA  
e-mail: tpdoyle@copper.net

while covering the incident of abuse in denial. In secular society sexual abusers are considered criminals and are effectively separated from the community. In the church-based culture, the errant clerics are protected while the victims are separated from the community. Such a response not only compounds the damage to the victim but adds a new layer of harm. The cultural context of clergy sexual abuse also has a serious impact on the recovery of the victim.

### The reality of religion-based psychological duress

Catholic victims, conditioned by their religious indoctrination, look on the clergy-abuser with a mixture of awe and fear. The cleric's attitude of superiority and power elicit a degree of emotional security in the victim. These strong feelings about clerics often impede victims from recognizing the seductive patterns the abuser is using to court them. The awe, fear and wonder experienced by the victim are best described as *religious duress*. This is a kind of fear inspired in victims that so constrains them that they cannot extricate themselves from abusers. In many ways *religious duress* is similar to the notion of *reverential fear*, a well-established category in Catholic Canon Law. This is a fear that is induced not from an unjust force from without but from the reverence one has for an authority figure. The victim experiences such a degree of fear of invoking the displeasure or even wrath of the authority figure that the will is significantly impeded. Child or adolescent victims are especially vulnerable to a priest-abuser. The priest is an adult with automatic power over the victim. He is also a priest with vast spiritual authority. Another component that often enters into the relationship is secrecy. The seduction process has created a secret and special relationship that entraps the victim.

Religious duress is an objective reality, experienced by reasonable people who are so influenced by the power of their religious beliefs and the system that imposes these beliefs that the will is unduly and unjustly constrained to perform an otherwise unfavorable act or to omit an act that the person would otherwise intend to do. Religious duress is the internal pressure experienced by a person as a result of fear-based beliefs. These beliefs focus on the reaction of an unseen supreme being to something the person either does, or, conversely, chooses not to do. Religious duress is a very special kind of fear the ultimate source of which is an unseen but all-powerful supreme being. Between the individual and this Supreme Being are religious personages who function as advocates or buffers.

From the dawn of history men and women have created religious belief systems and religious societies to communicate with the unseen powers. Some scholars have opined that the concept of religion appeared as a result of meteorological phenomena that were regularly observed but not understood by people. They did not know their origin, especially the more spectacular and destructive ones such as thunder, lightning, tornadoes, tidal waves or hurricanes. In their naiveté, people attributed such power to angry supreme beings or forces and sought ways to control or at least influence them so as to ensure their safety. In his book *Religion Explained*, scholar Pascal Boyer (2001) sums up the theories of many:

Most accounts of the origin of religion emphasize one of the following suggestions: human minds demand explanations, human hearts seek comfort, human society requires order, human intellect is illusion-prone. (p. 5)

Religion is a creation of mortals and not a creation of the unseen deities which they impose on humans. It is found throughout history and in every culture in many different forms. As people share their ideas about the unseen powers they are naturally led to theories about the nature and causal powers of these unseen beings (cf. Durkheim 1995).

Although religious systems have been created to relieve or displace the fear engendered by the unknown, these same systems have themselves been the origin of fear. In some instances well-intentioned religious leaders induce or provoke the fear in order to persuade people to avoid wrongdoing. In other cases the fear is both unjust and irrational, induced by religious personages who claim it to be of supernatural origin when in reality the object of the fear is not obedience to angry gods but control by humans. Thus the world of some organized religions can be every bit as terrifying as a world controlled by unseen angry supernatural forces. The gloom and fear that seem fundamental to some religions including many Christian denominations can be as mysterious as the unseen supernatural powers themselves.

Religious concepts are connected to human emotional systems. These systems react to life-threatening situations such as the power of nature or any other force that threatens a person and cannot be readily controlled. Returning to Boyer (2001):

It is probably true that religious concepts gain their great salience and emotional load in the human psyche because they are connected to thoughts about various life-threatening circumstances. So we will not understand religion if we do not understand the various emotional programs of the mind. (p. 23)

Fear prompts people to find ways to influence the superhuman entities in order to avoid their wrath and gain their benevolence. Hence the origin of the notion of *sacrifice* which is central to primitive and ancient religions as well as to Christianity. Mortals gave the first and best crops, the fatted calf, money and various promises of good behavior to the gods in return for their benevolence. There is even evidence of human sacrifice in several religious systems. With the notion of *sacrifice* comes the concept of *priesthood*.

*Priesthood* is the most ancient form of religious office. It is an office or role given to one who is thought by the community to be in a special, privileged position in the estimation of the unseen powers. The priest is the special person deputed by the community and favored by the gods to lead worship services but especially to offer sacrifices on behalf of individuals and the community. The earliest known religions have priestly offices. Because of their closeness to the deities, the priests themselves have traditionally been thought to have special powers. Since primitive and ancient societies were generally patriarchal and male dominated, the priests were most often men (cf. Landtman 1905; James 1955; Osborne 1988).

For the notion of sacrifice to have meaning it is essential that the supreme powers be conceived as theistic beings and not simply as an undifferentiated force. Thus the priest as advocate and mediator takes shape. The Christian religious systems all depend on the belief that God is a supreme being who is the ultimate creator and master of the universe. This god is believed to have emotions and other reactions similar to those found in humans. Thus the priest or holy man is essential to the welfare of the community because he acts as intermediary between the powerless people and the all-powerful and often angry Supreme Being. People attempt to communicate with the unseen powers using whatever means known to them. In turn they attempt to discern the communications from the gods with the essential assistance of the priest or holy man (Morwood 2000, chapters 1 and 5).

### **The Catholic priesthood within Catholic culture**

In the Christian tradition Catholicism is the oldest and in many ways, the prototype for Christian denominations. The priesthood has been central to the Catholic theological system because of the essential concept of *sacrifice*. Catholic theology and culture is firmly



structured around the belief that the Mass, or Eucharist, is the only acceptable sacrifice to God, having replaced all forms of sacrifice that preceded it. The notion of sacrifice presumes a belief that there remains a need for intercession and advocacy before God. The Mass is the center of Catholicism. The priest is essential to the Mass for without the priest there can be no Mass and without the Mass, there could be no Catholicism:

The Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch. (*The Catholic Catechism* 1994, n. 1324)

There is a connection between the concepts of an unseen and often stern Supreme Being; humanity born into sin and continuously prone to sin; the essential need for a way to appease and influence the Supreme Being; and a class of men who are set apart to act as the advocates for sinful people. In Catholic terminology we have a just God viewing created humans who are capable of sin and in need of a means of justification. That means is the Mass and sacraments. Essential to the Mass and sacraments are priests who are therefore essential to safe passage from this world to the next.

The Church has traditionally taught the radical distinction between the “priesthood of the laity” which imputes a calling on all persons who believe in Jesus Christ, and a special office of priesthood bestowed on selected men through the ceremony of ordination. To this office are attached the powers that are essential for Catholics to attain the fundamental goal of Christianity which is safe deliverance of the soul to the afterlife. The two major powers of Catholic priests are the power to celebrate Mass and the power to forgive sins in the name of God. Catholicism teaches that both are essential for salvation and fundamental to the nature and life of the church. The Church claims that the priesthood and the powers attached thereto are derived from Christ Himself. These claims have been challenged by some, especially certain Protestant denominations, which denied the uniqueness of the Catholic concept of priesthood. Consequently Catholic theologians took great pains to connect the priesthood and its powers with the Lord Himself:

Accordingly, the Catholic priesthood has the indisputable right to trace its origin in this respect also to the Divine Founder of the Church. Both sides of the priesthood were brought into prominence by the Council of Trent: “If any one shall say that in the New Testament there is no visible and external priesthood nor any power of consecrating and offering the Body and Blood of the Lord, as well as of remitting and retaining sins, but merely the office and bare ministry of preaching the Gospel, let him be anathema.” Far from being an “unjustifiable usurpation of Divine powers,” the priesthood forms so indispensable a foundation of Christianity that its removal would entail the destruction of the whole edifice. A Christianity without a priesthood cannot be the Church of Christ. (Pohle 1911, p. 415)

Essential to Catholic teaching is the belief that the Mass is the ceremony whereby the Lord Jesus becomes really present under the appearances of bread and wine. Only a valid priest can make this happen. Hence the concept of the priest as the “*alter Christus*” or “other Christ.” The 16th century Council of Trent summarized the Church’s traditional teaching about priesthood and sacrifice:

Sacrifice and priesthood are by Divine ordinance so inseparable that they are found together under all laws. Since therefore in the New Testament the Catholic Church has

received from the Lord's institution the holy visible sacrifice of the Eucharist it must also be admitted that in the Church there is a new, visible and external priesthood into which the older priesthood has been changed. (Schroeder 1941, p. 160)

The life of the Catholic Church is built around a sacramental system. To understand the power of the priesthood and the fear that this office can create one must understand the concept of *sacrament*. A sacrament is a ceremony or ritual that results in an invisible expression of Divine Power for the recipient. The seven sacraments of the Catholic Church all are related to key moments of life such as birth, death, advancement to adulthood, propagation, leadership and forgiveness. The Church teaches that the sacraments are necessary for salvation and for membership and participation in the Church community.

The sacraments are controlled by the priests and bishops who are also the ministers whose powers are essential to the celebration or happening of each sacrament. Although the actual ministers of the sacrament of marriage are the spouses themselves, Catholic Church law requires that a cleric be part of the ceremony as the official witness. The only other exception is with baptism since the Church teaches that in a true emergency any person, even one who is not a Catholic or even a Christian, can validly administer this sacrament. Yet for the rest, the presence and action of a priest, deacon or bishop is essential. Not only is the ministry of the cleric essential, but access to the sacraments is controlled by the clerics. Though they are bound to follow Church law and theology which theoretically assure a degree of objectivity and equity, the practical application is left with the individual priest or bishop.

The concept of *sin* is fundamental to maintaining the stature of the priest. Christian theology defines a sin as an offense committed by a mortal person against the immortal God. Catholic tradition speaks of three kinds of sin: *original sin*, which is a negative spiritual condition which all are born with and which can only be relieved by baptism. The traditional teaching held that those who died in original sin would never enjoy heaven but rather would be consigned to a bland state called *limbo* wherein the person remained for eternity without the possibility of enjoying the presence of God. *Venial sin* is defined as a less serious offense against God and one that results in a temporary sentence in purgatory, a kind of mild version of hell but from which there is hope of eventual release into heaven. Finally there is *mortal sin* which is a grave offense against God and which results in eternal damnation in hell if the sinner dies without having been absolved of this sin.

Original sin is eliminated by baptism, usually administered by a priest. Venial sins are absolved through confession and future penalties attached to them can be reduced or eliminated by doing a variety of good works or performing various spiritual exercises. Absolution from the effects of mortal sin requires remorse, a purpose of amendment and the intercession of a priest. Fear of divine wrath and everlasting damnation are motivations for believers to change their ways, abandon the acts that result in sin and seek the ministry of a priest. The power of the priest is evident in that he is believed to control deliverance for the errant believer. Added to the already powerful role of the ordained cleric is the fact that the church's leadership, comprised exclusively of male, celibate clerics, claims the authority to define which acts constitute mortal or venial sins. This claim to power has been exaggerated in the minds of believers for centuries. The common belief has invested bishops and especially popes with the God-given authority to determine which human actions are or are not serious sins. In other words, it enables the clerics to speak for God and control access to God.

Like their historical counterparts from pre-Christian societies, Catholic priests and bishops are cloaked with an aura of mystery and power. Traditionally they have lived apart

from the laity. They have dressed differently and been held in esteem by religious and secular society. There is no question but that the institutional church has created and sustained this priestly mystique by its official teaching, its regulatory or legal system as well as by a complex collection of mythical stories and traditions surrounding priests and bishops. Mandatory celibacy has served to reinforce this mystique that Catholic priests are somehow removed and above other people, especially the Catholic laity because of their power over sexuality.

The external trappings of office holders in the Church governmental system as well as its elaborate liturgical rituals also enhance the notion of the priest or bishop as “other” or powerful. The Catholic Church as a socio-political reality is governed by a hierarchical system wherein all power resides in clerics. It teaches that this system cannot be changed because it was instituted by the Supreme Being. The hierarchical government is actually a monarchy with the pope as the absolute ruler of the entire Catholic Church, answerable to no human power. Each diocese is ruled by a bishop who answers only to the pope. The monarchical governmental system has given rise to its own aristocracy which is comprised only of clerics. Over the centuries the clerics of all ranks wore ceremonial garb called *vestments* when taking part in religious rituals. They also wore non-liturgical garb that amounts to court dress. The higher in rank the more elaborate the cleric’s robes. Until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council the proper robes for bishops and higher prelates included long trains of watered silk, jeweled crosses, silver-buckled shoes and ostentatious rings. The reforms simplified the dress somewhat although bishops and other prelates still wear distinctive and elaborate robes. The attempts of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to restore the clerical culture to its former stature have included a return to some of the traditional pageantry in dress and ceremony.

The notion that clerics are fundamentally different, special and powerful is projected by the Church teaching but even more powerfully by the visual symbols of their power and exalted status. The priest or bishop is clearly the center of attention in liturgical rituals, even those which are “about” lay people such as baptism and marriage. The Mass, especially when conducted by a bishop or pope, resembles not the meal of the last Supper but rather an elaborate court ritual with multiple signs of obeisance to the central clerical figure.

The Catholic Church has taught for centuries that priests are men set apart from and above others. The difference begins with ordination. At that moment, by divine action, the man is made a priest and is joined to Christ in such a way that he is substantially different from other human beings. The official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes it thus:

This sacrament configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ’s instrument for his Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet, and king. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1994, n. 1581)

The Catechism restates a doctrine that has been an essential part of Catholic belief for centuries, namely that priests represent Jesus Christ in a very special way. This doctrine is responsible for the erroneous belief held by many abuse victims that the priest is God’s stand-in:

In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts in persona Christi Capitis [in the person of Christ, the head]. It is the same priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and possesses the authority



to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself (*virtute ac persona ipsius Christi*). Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law was a figure of Christ, and the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, n. 1548)

The ministerial priesthood has the task not only of representing Christ—Head of the Church—before the assembly of the faithful, but also of acting in the name of the whole Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, and above all when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, n. 1552)

The contemporary expression of this teaching is a continuation of that which has been standard through the centuries. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* contains statements that summarize the Church's understanding of the priesthood as it was taught up to the era of Vatican Council II (1963–65). The present official understanding is much akin to that found in this document although couched in less triumphalistic terms:

In the first place, then, the faithful should be shown how great is the dignity and excellence of this sacrament considered in its highest degree, the priesthood.

Bishops and priests being, as they are, God's interpreters and ambassadors, empowered in his name to teach mankind the divine law and the rules of conduct and holding, as they do, His place on earth, it is evident that no nobler function than theirs can be imagined. Justly therefore are they called not only Angels, but even gods, because of the fact that they exercise in our midst the power and prerogatives of the immortal God.

In all ages priests have been held in the highest honor; yet the priests of the New Testament far exceed all others. For the power of consecrating and offering the body and blood of our Lord and of forgiving sins, which has been conferred on them, not only has nothing equal or like it on earth, but even surpasses human reason and understanding. (McHugh and Callan 1923, p. 318)

The *Baltimore Catechism* was the text used for Catholic religious education from the pre-Vatican II era into the seventies. It presented Catholic doctrine in a question and answer format and avoided both discussion and the opportunity for disagreement. Concerning the priesthood the *Catechism* says:

Q. 280. How should Christians look upon the priests of the Church?

A. Christians should look upon the priests of the Church as the messengers of God and the dispensers of His mysteries.

Q. 997. How do we know that the priests of the Church are the messengers of God?

A. We know that the priests of the Church are the messengers of God, because Christ said to His apostles, and through them to their successors: "As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you"; that is to say, to preach the true religion, to administer the Sacraments, to offer Sacrifice, and to do all manner of good for the salvation of souls.

Q. 999. Why should we show great respect to the priests and bishops of the Church?

A. We should show great respect to the priests and bishops of the Church:

- (1) Because they are the representatives of Christ upon earth, and
- (2) Because they administer the Sacraments without which we cannot be saved.

Therefore, we should be most careful in what we do, say or think concerning God's ministers. To show our respect in proportion to their dignity, we address the priest as Reverend, the bishop as Right Reverend, the archbishop as Most Reverend, and the Pope as Holy Father.

Q. 1002. How do we know that there is a true priesthood in the Church?

A. We know that there is a true priesthood in the Church:

- (1) Because in the Jewish religion, which was only a figure of the Christian religion, there was a true priesthood established by God;
- (2) Because Christ conferred on His apostles and not on all the faithful the power to offer Sacrifice, distribute the Holy Eucharist and forgive sins.

Q. 1003. But is there need of a special Sacrament of Holy Orders to confer these powers?

A. There is need of a special Sacrament of Holy Orders to confer these powers:

- (1) Because the priesthood which is to continue the work of the apostles must be visible in the Church, and it must therefore be conferred by some visible ceremony or outward sign;
- (2) Because this outward sign called Holy Orders gives not only power but grace and was instituted by Christ, Holy Orders must be a Sacrament.

Q. 1004. Can bishops, priests and other ministers of the Church always exercise the power they have received in Holy Orders?

A. Bishops, priests and other ministers of the Church cannot exercise the power they have received in Holy Orders unless authorized and sent to do so by their lawful superiors. The power can never be taken from them, but the right to use it may be withdrawn for causes laid down in the laws of the Church, or for reasons that seem good to those in authority over them. Any use of sacred power without authority is sinful, and all who take part in such ceremonies are guilty of sin.

The official church teaching was reflected in popular literature which supported the belief that the priest was a man set apart, entitled to deference and respect. Popular Catholicism encouraged the exalted role of the priest and surrounded it with an exaggerated form of piety and respect. An excerpt from the writings of St. John Vianney, a 19th century French pastor who is considered the patron saint of all parish priests typifies the romantic popular beliefs:

What is a priest! A man who holds the place of God—a man who is invested with all the powers of God. “Go,” said Our Lord to the priest; “as My Father sent Me, I send you. All power has been given Me in Heaven and on earth. Go then, teach all nations. . . . He who listens to you, listens to Me; he who despises you despises Me. “When the priest remits sins, he does not say, “God pardons you”; he says, “I absolve you.” At the Consecration, he does not say, “This is the Body of Our Lord”; he says, “This is My Body.”

If I were to meet a priest and an angel, I should salute the priest before I saluted the angel. The latter is the friend of God; but the priest holds His place. St. Teresa kissed the ground where a priest had passed. When you see a priest, you should say, “There is he who made me a child of God, and opened Heaven to me by holy Baptism; he



who purified me after I had sinned; who gives nourishment to my soul.” At the sight of a church tower, you may say, “What is there in that place?” “The Body of Our Lord.” “Why is He there?” “Because a priest has been there, and has said holy Mass (Vianney 1987)

These sentiments are alive among Catholics today. They are expressed in a variety of popular writings including statements of Pope John Paul II:

The ordained ministry, which may never be reduced to its merely functional aspect since it belongs on the level of “being,” enables the priest to act “in persona Christi” and culminates in the moment when he consecrates the bread and wine, repeating the actions and words of Jesus during the Last Supper. Before this extraordinary reality we find ourselves amazed and overwhelmed, so deep is the humility by which God “stoops” in order to unite himself with man! If we feel moved before the Christmas crib, when we contemplate the Incarnation of the Word, what must we feel before the altar where, by the poor hands of the priest, Christ makes his Sacrifice present in time? We can only fall to our knees and silently adore this supreme mystery of faith. (John Paul II 2004)

### The clerical culture

Priests are members of the clerical state, a sub-culture within Catholicism. The Church has long maintained that the division between clerics and laity is itself of divine origin. This stratified and unequal society has served to protect the belief that priests are special and thereby exempt from much of the social and legal accountability expected of lay persons. The present *Code of Canon Law* defines the church as a society made up of the laity and, by divine origin, the hierarchy (Code of Canon Law 1983, canon 207, par. 1). The hierarchy, which is the ruling class, is made up of deacons, priests and bishops who, in order to function as such, must be members of the clerical state. The stratification of the ecclesial society has been an integral part of Catholic teaching for centuries and is well summed up in this excerpt from a 1906 encyclical letter issued by Pope St. Pius X:

It follows that the Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members toward that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led and, like docile flock, to follow the Pastors. (Pius X 1906, par. 8)

The political structure of the Church was a natural parent to the attitude of superiority on the part of the clergy. Early on in its history the institutional church began to construct a theology of sacred orders (deacon, priest, bishop) that supported the isolation of clerics into a special caste and easily led to the negative philosophy of clericalism. The common conception, evident from theological and catechetical writings, church law and liturgical practice, is that bishops are direct descendants of the apostles and both bishops and priests are ontologically different from lay persons because they have been singled out by God to take the place of Jesus Christ on earth. In spite of the lack of concrete scriptural and historical evidence of such singularity, this theology developed, filling the scriptural gaps with the assertion that if something was not grounded in scripture it was part of an authentic but undocumented tradition.

Clericalism is the label given to the radical misunderstanding of the place of clerics in the Catholic Church and in secular society. This pejorative “ism” is grounded in the erroneous belief that clerics form a special elite and, because of their powers as sacramental ministers, they are superior to the laity. These spiritual powers have historically led to a variety of social privileges which in turn have regularly resulted in different levels of corruption (Sanchez 1972, p. 7). The negative impact of the clerical culture has been acknowledged for centuries. Well-known Catholic writer Russell Shaw (1993) says:

Yet the clericalist mindset does fundamentally distort, disrupt, and poison the Christian lives of members of the church, clergy and laity alike, and weakens the church in her mission to the world. Clericalism is not the cause of every problem in the church, but it causes many and is a factor in many more. Time and again . . . it plays a role in the debilitating controversies that today afflict the Catholic community in the United States and other countries. (p. 13)

Following the Second Vatican Council many clergy and Catholic laity hoped that the power of clericalism would wane, especially in light of the Council’s emphasis on the role of lay members in Church life. Yet recent studies indicate that the present generation of young priests see themselves as essentially different from the laity and as men set apart by God, clearly reflecting the elitist attitude (Hoge 2002, p. 27). It appears from this and other indicators that Catholic clericalism is not only alive but malignant. The clericalism of the past and its present-day expressions, have a common goal, which is the retention of the power, prestige and image of the members of the clerical elite, especially the bishops. As such it is not difficult to see clericalism as an *enabler* of the contemporary clergy abuse scandal. In spite of promises to the contrary, the Catholic hierarchy, supported by significant numbers of the laity, remain defensive. The tension is well expressed by theologian and psychologist Donald Cozzens (2004), a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio:

Until we take to heart the understanding of the church as fundamentally the baptized communion of Jesus’ disciples . . . the laity will continue to encounter suspicion and mistrust from church authorities. And the church itself, even after promising transparency and accountability as the American bishops did in the wake of the clergy sex abuse scandal, will continue to practice denial, dissimulation and deception. These characteristics flow, quite naturally, from an understanding of the church as a society made up of unequals. (Cozzens 2004, p. 11)

### **Clerical impact on victims**

This belief in the unique role of the priesthood and priests and its supporting theology can result in great harm to believers. Victims of clergy sexual abuse regularly report that they were paralyzed and numb with fear when the abuse occurred because of their disbelief that so sublime a personage would stoop to harm them. For many Catholics any expression of sexuality outside of marriage was considered a mortal sin, carrying the potential for eternal damnation. The emotional and psychological turmoil triggered by abuse at the hands of a cleric is difficult to describe or even imagine. The priest represented the divine presence to many victims. The priest was the enforcer of the church’s stringent moral code and he was also the source of relief from the sins committed against this moral code. Catholics are taught from youth that all expressions of sexuality in thought, word, deed or desire are mortally sinful outside of marriage. The confusion is compounded when the abuser is a

priest. The youthful Catholic often believed the priest can do no wrong therefore the sinfulness of any sexual action must be attributed to the victims. It has not been unusual for victims to blame themselves for the abuse and to feel guilt at having led a priest into sin.

The impact on Catholic victims is unique and, in the opinion of some experts, particularly devastating precisely because the abuser is a priest. Catholic victims, brought up in a church dominated by clerics, believe that priests take the place of Christ. In the minds and emotions of the victims the priest is much more than a pastor or minister. He is a very special father figure and the earthly representative of God Himself. Many victims experience a kind of toxic transference and see in their sexual abuse a form of spiritual death. Dr. Leslie Lothstein of the Institute for the living graphically describes it:

The difference is that the role of the priest puts the priest in close connection with Jesus and with God. And what you hear from the victims—and I've heard this from priests who have been victims—is that they feel that their soul has been murdered. Its soul murder, soul murder, and they can never get over the guilt and shame of what their responsible role was—why was I chosen, how did this happen to me, and can I ever be reconnected with God? (DeGiulio 2002)

Victims describe the spiritual impact of abuse by a priest in many ways but the common denominator is spiritual devastation or, as Lothstein puts it so well, *soul murder*. For many the aftermath is a lifetime of painful spiritual loss and acute emptiness. These victims were almost universally devout, believing, and religiously naive Catholics. Sexual abuse by God's personal representative is often described as a ripping away of their souls. For others their lives are filled with a painful anger that roars to life whenever they see a priest or some other church-related reminder of their abuse. Victims regularly report panic attacks when in or near a church, nausea and violent anxiety reactions to seeing or hearing a priest and even anger at God that He has somehow violated them and then abandoned them.

In nearly every case of clergy sexual abuse the victim is devout, believes in all church teaching without question and is the product of a practicing Catholic family. Such victims have been subjected to a special form of indoctrination from their earliest years. This has left them incapable of questioning, doubting or criticizing the word of the priests and bishops for fear of incurring divine wrath. The church teaching, imparted by the clerics and other official representatives, is fortified by the parents who themselves have been raised to treat the church officials with a mixture of fear, awe and respect. They validate the official teaching and encourage their children to defer to clerics by their words but especially by their own attitudes of servility and fear.

The stratified ecclesial society with its projection of the superior authority of the clergy can easily prevent Catholics from ever achieving a psychologically healthy and spiritually mature degree of participation in the church. In short, Catholic adults are expected to be docile and obedient and to accept as true all utterances of the priests and bishops much less the popes. Though St. Paul, in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth urged them to maturity, the constant attitude projected by official Catholic leadership has been quite the opposite. Nevertheless the words of Paul are still valid: "*Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil, be infants, but in your thinking be adults*" (1 Cor 14:20–21).

This serious lack of religious maturity has had disastrous results for the victims of clergy sexual abuse as well as for their families. As many victims have matured past the age of their abuse they have remained trapped in a cocoon of fear that prevented them from disclosing the abuse. Parents and other family members have often fallen prey to the deceptive manipulations of clerics when they have disclosed their children's abuse. Their religious immaturity and the childish reaction in their communications with clerics have



filled them with the irrational fear that disclosure would result in serious sin on their part. Far too many have feared to question the clerics who had enjoined their silence by a variety of means ranging from convincing but false solicitude to pleading to intimidation and finally to threats. The clerical system has persuaded and intimidated them into believing that the clerical leaders always have the last word and that word is correct. Such naive Catholics are taught that to disagree with, disbelieve or dispute the word of a priest or bishop is a sign of weak faith and probably a sin. They are unable to distinguish between their justifiable anger at clerics, especially abusive clerics, and their faith in God. The seeds of this confusion have been planted by the church's own teaching and nurtured by the clerical elite.

Religious duress and the irrational and deep fear that it engenders are each a direct product of a deviant religious indoctrination that is epitomized by clericalism. The impact on victims of clergy sexual abuse is fourfold:

1. *Seduction and grooming.* It is considered a great honor when the priest singles out the son or daughter of such a family for particular attention. Parents have generally been completely unsuspecting of the attention paid to a young son or daughter and have even unwittingly enabled the abuse by allowing and encouraging overnight trips and the like. This process is commonly referred to as "courtship" or "grooming." Eventually the cleric makes the first sexual move and the young victim is, more often than not, stunned into disbelief.
2. *Moral confusion.* Victims reared in an atmosphere that accepted the traditional Church teaching on sexuality were convinced and unable to question the belief that any form of sexual expression, be it thought, word or especially deed, is mortally sinful. Furthermore they were taught that homosexuality is officially deemed unnatural, homosexual people "fundamentally disordered" and all sexual expression particularly sinful. In the face of this the priest, the personification of this stringent sexual morality and one who is theoretically devoid of any potential for sexual temptation, is the very one leading the victim into a forbidden sexual act. The victim is now caught in a powerful dilemma. He or she has been groomed and led along to a place of significant trust. Now, something forbidden has happened. Confusion, guilt and shame set in after the shock begins to wear off. The guilt and confusion are especially toxic if the young victim has experienced pleasurable sexual feelings. The moral theology taught by the clerical world came forth from a source that did not understand much less accept the complex nature of the sexual response. This plunges the victim into deeper confusion. The clerical world has also taught the victim that the only acceptable relief from the guilt of sin is confession and absolution given by the priest. But the very source of relief from sin is also the efficient cause of the sin so the victim is immobilized and the guilt, shame and trauma only intensify.
3. *Nonresistance to prolonged abuse.* Extensive clinical and legal evidence shows that most sexual abuse is not limited to an isolated act. Perpetrators often claim it only happened once but subsequent investigation generally discovers patterns of abuse over days, weeks and sometimes years. Indeed in some cases the victims returned to their perpetrators of abuse knowing what was in store for them. Observers often wonder, and rightly so, how some victims remain in such "relationships." Many victims have later reported that they felt trapped and increasingly powerless as the abuse continued. Some reported being conscious of a sort of bond with the abuser which of course further confused the issue by increasing ambivalence and guilt. Uninformed critics have frequently claimed that in such cases the victim was indeed a willing participant and

perhaps even an aggressor. The pathological dynamic of the relationship suggests that such suggestions are far from the truth and constitute only defensive, wishful thinking by those incapable of accepting the reality of the scandal (see Julich 2005).

4. *Failure to report.* The existence of the trauma bond also explains why so many victims failed to report abuse after it started and often for months or years after it had ended. They did not report because they *could not* report. Apart from the fear and shame that often arose from sexual abuse, victims had to deal with the entire Catholic institution that loomed before them. Many believed their abusers who convinced them that no one would believe them. Still others succumbed to implied or direct intimidation and threats from church authorities. The clerical elite, incapable of seeing a victim's report of sexual abuse as anything more than a threat to the Church's security, often responded in a predictable manner. The victim was often turned into a potential enemy and made to feel guilty for contemplating an action that would embarrass or hurt a priest.

The inability to resist prolonged abuse is best explained by the psychological phenomenon known as the *trauma bond*. Dr. William Foote, a psychologist from Arizona and a medical expert on several clergy sexual abuse cases, has explored the phenomenon whereby a kind of relationship or bond is created between a clerical perpetrator and his victim. The term was first used by Dr. David Dutton, a Canadian psychologist who had done extensive research on domestic violence and child abuse. According to Dr. Foote, Dutton describes traumatic bonding as:

the development of strong emotional ties between two persons, with one person intermittently harassing, beating, threatening, abusing or intimidating the other. Dr. Dutton notes that this phenomenon is based on the existence of a power imbalance wherein the maltreated person perceives him or herself to be subjugated to be dominated by the other. (Foote 1998, par. 8)

There are distinct similarities between Dutton's trauma bond and the Stockholm Syndrome and both are applicable to the unique "relationship" between a clergy perpetrator and his victim. The toxic bond that often exists is enabled by a pre-existing emotional relationship between the two which causes the victim to see no other choice but to remain in the abusive situation (Julich 2005, p. 120). The victim experiences profound internal confusion grounded in his or her beliefs about the clergy perpetrator and enhanced by the fear from religious duress.

The trauma bond becomes stronger and even more pathological as the exploitive relationship continues. It is often affirmed in the victim's view, by the Church's apparent approval of the priest's behavior. The clerical world, unwilling or unable to proactively confront clergy sexual abuse, appears to the victim to be unconcerned. The victim feels trapped until either the abuser ends the relationship or some other event from without causes it to terminate. In some instances the abuse had grown so repulsive to the victims that they broke the bond and fled.

The reality of religious duress and the abject fear it causes is not subjective to some few individuals who may be predisposed to it due to other emotional or psychological issues. The coercive nature of the sources of duress argue strongly that it is not an occasional response experienced only by those who have been harmed by churchmen. In effect religious duress is an integral pillar of the ecclesiastical edifice, essential to achieving the control and obedience demanded by the clerical elite. This unique genre of fear is experienced to one degree or another by every class of people who take part in the Church. This includes hierarchy, clergy and certainly laity.

The reality is objective and found across a broad spectrum of Catholics regardless of educational or familial background, cultural status or age. The emotional and psychological reaction to the institutional church and to clerics is the result of a systematic pattern of religious indoctrination. This indoctrination is grounded in established teachings and beliefs held by the official church. When these beliefs, epitomized in the belief that priests are sacred personages who stand in the place of God, become interwoven with the natural fear and wonder of the unknown, the result can be a fear so grave that it impedes the normal evaluative thought processes and constrains the will from choosing to act in circumstances that would benefit the individual. The fear that arises from the threat of displeasure of religious officials carries over to a fear of displeasing God and this fear can be overpowering and immobilizing.

### **Commentary by Dr. Marianne Benkert**

The Catholic Church is a religious system based on a clerical culture that dominates and excludes laypersons. Thomas Doyle clearly describes this culture and the mixture of fear, awe and respect that the cleric inspires because of his role as intermediary between God and man, conferred by ordination. These attitudes are cultivated by the church and are pivotal to the church retaining its current power structure and control. This fear, awe and respect for the clergy is what fosters and makes possible the reality of religious duress.

Religious duress is embedded in Catholic theology and it is a pillar of control within the system. Those within the clerical culture are not immune, because of the levels of inequality: bishops rule over their clergy, while cardinals have an additional level of honor, which allows them closer ties with the Pope. Clerics often have to sacrifice their own inner convictions, ideals and identity in order to conform to the teachings of the Pope and local bishops. They are living in a religious system that is monarchical in structure. They too are subject to fear, awe and respect for those higher in ecclesiastical authority.

The flock is to follow the Pastor. In fact, the layperson is expected to abdicate thoughtful, meaningful decisions and follow the tenets of the Church. Nowhere is this more prominent than in the area of sexuality, where every sexual thought, word and action outside of marriage is considered mortally sinful. The Catholic cleric by virtue of ordination publicly proclaims his commitment to celibacy. The Church teaches this sacrifice of sexual activity offers greater freedom to serve the people of God. This gives the cleric an aura and trust that is not duplicated in any other situation. Any sexual abuse by a cleric then takes on a special significance as historian Mayke De Jong says “it was from sexual purity that the priesthood was believed to have derived its power” (De Jong 1998, p. 50). This special trust makes the victim more vulnerable. For the victim of sexual abuse, the more trusted the abuser the more destructive is the abuse.

Small children totally trust their parents to care for all their needs. This then leaves the child free to grow emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically. Their trust radiates out as they grow and interact in a widening social circle and school environment. Transference is the redirection to significant others of those emotions that were originally felt in childhood. Trust is the most important element. In a toxic transference with the clergy sexual abuser, the victim assumes the priest merits trust and cares for his/her best interest. If actions occur that make the child question this, where can the victim go? The religious culture in which the victim is raised supports the cleric. The child is conflicted, confused and fearful, and simply overwhelmed by these emotions. The result is numbness and immobilization and the inability to think in a rational manner.



Children are not little adults. A considerable amount of psychic energy is necessary to negotiate the developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence, but this is the only path to healthy maturity. Sexual abuse ties up and consumes this energy, interfering with psychological, emotional and intellectual development. Sexual abuse is always damaging to the child or young person, and trust, the foundation on which all development is built crumbles.

The developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence are ongoing and sequential. If derailed by sexual abuse, arrested development results, never to be retrieved. The consequences worsen over the years. Although the victim ages chronologically, the emotional and psychological development remains fixed at a childhood level. The victim remains trapped in the cocoon of fear.

The Church hierarchy fails to educate itself about child development. If familiar with this knowledge it would have understanding and empathy for the destructiveness of sexual abuse by its members. In times past there was no more trusted person in the community than the priest. When the cleric sexually violates this trust, the damage to the child is overwhelming and long lasting. Shame and guilt are heavy burdens to carry, and sap the young person of the energy needed to grow and develop into a healthy adult.

Sexual abuse is endemic in our society and it occurs most often in the family setting. It is most often dealt with by denial and secrecy so that the family system will not be threatened or forced to change with all the associated turmoil that accompanies such an acknowledgement. Very frequently under the pressure the victim remains silent.

Victims of Catholic clergy sexual seduction, assault, and abuse deal similarly with their fate. Open and honest confrontation would force changes that threaten the current clerical power system and the image the Church so assiduously fights to project. The Church is committed to maintaining its power structure and image at all costs. Systemically the Church employs basic primitive psychological defenses to accomplish this end: denial, rationalization, and projection. The Catholic Church is like any system that must keep all its complex parts functioning in a traditional way to maintain the power of the administration.

Sexual abuse by a cleric is especially onerous and has unique psychological effects on victims. Some clinical examples illustrate this: a middle aged man, a victim of abuse at 9 years old says poignantly, “I wonder what kind of person I would have been if this had not happened to me.” A 50-year-old woman abused by her pastor at the same age removes his funeral remembrance card from her purse and weeps. She told no one before, but has carried this card with her for all these years burdened by her secret. One mother sent her 10-year-old daughter to summon the priest to come home for a sick call; he abused this unsuspecting little girl before going to see her mother. This grown woman who now realized that the priest was also having a sexual affair with her mother wept bitterly saying, “How could he do this? He stood at the altar and said Mass at our Church.” When a teenaged girl sought comfort and counseling from her school chaplain after the suicide of her father he took advantage of her vulnerability. Only as an adult could she understand the destructive and despicable way the priest had used her in this situation. The scars of all these people are permanent, deep, and similar. These were not random acts of sexual abuse by strangers, but actions perpetrated on children who knew and had every reason to trust their abusers. These children attended Catholic schools, and were from devout Catholic families. They revered these priests with a marked degree of respect, awe, and fear—elements that establish the pillars of religious duress. The force of a powerful world-wide religious institution, the Catholic Church, supports the image of these men as personal representatives of Christ on earth. These children could not suspect or imagine that such men would harm them in this destructive and selfish way. After these violations occurred

the children assumed that any sinfulness must be their fault and they took on the shame and guilt that rightfully belonged to their abusers. Guilt, fear, and shame prevented them from telling anyone of their experiences. This internalized pressure rendered them incapable of utilizing protective mechanisms that might otherwise have been available to them. Religious duress is psychologically a special kind of constraint and threat that affects members of the Catholic Church because of its clerical power structure.

Sexual abuse by Catholic clergy can be likened to the damages suffered by a person exposed to lead, asbestos, or other toxic chemicals. Only after many years the damage of this exposure becomes clearly evident to the victim. The toxin has been insidious and unrelenting in its destruction, causing irreversible wounds. Because the Catholic Church has been so intent on keeping the clerical culture intact, and protecting its clerics, it has sacrificed some of its most vulnerable members. Ironically this stance has done more than anything to undermine the credibility and moral authority of the Church.

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