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Priestly Sexual Abuse

by

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Sexual abuse by priests has not previously been a significant problem for the Catholic Church in the United States. Publicity regarding clerical sexual abuse increased significantly about seventeen years ago with the revelation of the crimes in 1985 in Louisiana of Rev. Gilbert Gauthe who abused dozens of children, who were subsequently awarded 18 million dollars.¹ The term "pedophile priest" first appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter* in that same year.² The media coverage has become extreme with the revelation in the Archdiocese of Boston of the behavior of Rev. John Geoghan.¹

While the media, in a secular culture such as ours, will exploit negative publicity against the Church for a variety of reasons, on this issue much of it is justified. It would appear that priestly sexual abuse has increased since Vatican II. Many of the currently publicized instances of abuse occurred twenty or more years ago or as the "spirit" of Vatican II was beginning to take effect.

A self-evident question is: was there a change in the seminary formation of priests that occurred after Vatican II that might explain the current problem? It is the thesis of this paper that there was a change of psychological theory, in the area of sexuality, as taught in Catholic seminaries and universities. A shift from Thomistic rational psychology to Freudian sensualistic psychoanalytical theory occurred. This latter psychology not only did not promote the virtue of chastity but actually declared it emotionally damaging. The new psychology was then employed in the selection and formation of priests in American seminaries. The end result is the current priest "pedophile" crisis. We will discuss: 1) the problem, 2) the cause, and 3) the solution.

The Problem

The prevalence of sexual abusers among priests in the United States is less than 2%.⁴ Sexual abuse is variously defined but generally is considered non-consensual sexual contact, even touching, with another person, male or female. Heterosexual consensual contact is, of course, contrary to the vow of chastity and, under the circumstances, remarkably unusual for priests. Homosexual consensual behavior is engaged in by an estimated 10% of priests.⁵

Sexual abuse can occur with an adult or a minor (legally a person less than 18 years of age), male or female. Most instances of priest sexual abuse with minors involve adolescent males (13-17 years) and technically is called ephebophilia. True pedophilia or sexual contact with a pre-adolescent (through age 12) is much less common, even rare among priests. Most sexual abuse by priests is by definition homosexual (sexual activity by sexually mature, including adolescent, males) genital activity.

The dimensions of the sexual abuse problem are difficult to define for a variety of reasons. Statistics are difficult to collect because official reporting, unlike cancer or auto accidents, may or may not take place. The abuse is private and is often one person's word against another. Victims are embarrassed and hesitant to report. Reporting rates have varied with the fluctuations in media interest, currently intense compared to 20-30 years ago. Nevertheless there are some reasonable statistics.

A review of the literature suggests that sex abuse is not uncommon. College men are reported to have rates of sexual abuse against women, including rape, attempted rape, and sexual assault of 9.5% to 65% (Table 1).⁶⁻⁹ Sexual abuse against children is particularly reprehensible and, surprisingly, 50% of child abusers are reported to be parents.³ Sexual abuse, predominantly against males 12-18 years of age is reported to be 10% for Protestant clergy, while pedophilia is 2-3% for that group.¹⁰ The most reliable sources suggest that 1.7% of priests are involved in sexual abuse of which 0.2% are true pedophiles.¹¹ In contrast, homosexual males are reported to be between 34% and 35% of pedophiles.^{12, 14} Homosexuals are reported to be 2% of the United States population.¹⁵

An effort has been made to collect admittedly disparate data and summarize them in an overview. The number of reported cases of priest sex abuse increased in the 1980s, concurrent with the publicity surrounding the Gilbert Gauthé case, compared to the 1960s and 1970s. The Boston cases involving John Geoghan and Paul Shanley have resulted in another quantum leap of publicity and reported cases in 2002 (Table 2). The cost of the priest sexual abuse problem was estimated to be one billion dollars in 2002 (Table 3). Generalizations are risky but the rate of priest sex abuse seems to have been low prior to the 1960s. They increased in the 1970s

and 1980s. Given that much of the current publicity is over anecdotal cases, and twenty or more years old, it is questionable whether the rate is increasing at the present time.

There are several factors that compound the problem. One is the fact that priests take a vow of celibacy, which precludes sexual activity, and the sin is a violation not only of the sixth commandment but it is also compounded by a sin against the first commandment as well. An additional factor is the public scandal resulting from sexual abuse by priests. The Church and its priests are, and should be, held to a higher standard. The dominant culture is secular and only too happy to expose the obvious hypocrisy of sinful priests.

In this regard it is obvious that the media employs a double standard. On the one hand it is having a field day, indeed a feeding frenzy, exposing priests who have sex with minors and bishops ineffective in their efforts to control the scandal while simultaneously promoting a sexually promiscuous culture. Abusing priests are excoriated for contact with 16 and 17-year-olds, while homosexuals (North American Man-Boy Association - NAMBLA), desirous of lowering the legal age of consent to 15 years, are afforded publicity for, and their views considered reasonable and worthy of, legislative approval. The play, "Vagina Monologues," a play involving the sexual abuse of a 14-year-old girl, and the recent "Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex"¹⁶ extolling the benefits of sexual abuse are examples of cultural approval of what is otherwise vilified when done by priests. Indeed a double standard.

This is compounded by the fact that a culture that extols civil liberties and presumed innocence denies accused priests these rights. An accusation occurring 25 years ago and as yet unsubstantiated can result in notification of public authorities, suspension of priestly faculties, and defamation of character, and all without due process.

Cause

The problem of priestly sexual abuse is complex with many causes, but for several reasons we can begin our search for explanation with Eugene Kennedy's book *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Psychological Investigation*,¹⁷ published in 1972. Kennedy was a priest at the time, although he shortly thereafter was laicized and married a former nun. The book was commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops as part of a series studying the priesthood. Employing Erickson's¹⁸ stages of development, Kennedy notes that maturity requires intimacy, including sexual intimacy, at stage six, or the early adult state. Since priests lack development at this stage they are by definition underdeveloped. In summary, Kennedy noted that 92% of priests were abnormal, principally

because, and here I'm oversimplifying, of arrested psychosocial development. The thesis of this book has had great influence and has left a paper trail in many, if not most, major studies of the priesthood particularly those of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Kennedy's *Psychological Investigation* is critical for two reasons. First, it was commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and therefore was assumed to have their imprimatur. Second, it provided a rationale for the loosening of the sexual strictures of the vow of celibacy for priests and by extension for the laity as well. Kennedy's book articulates the paradigm shift in Catholic thinking from what might be summarized as an Aristotelian rational psychology¹⁹ to a Freudian psychology. The concept of an intellect and a free will determining human choices was replaced by a mechanistic libido driven behavior.

As an aside, one wonders if Kennedy may not have been begging the question. He was apparently unhappy with his own vocation and, if indeed celibacy precluded maturity, his reason could be seen as justifying and reinforcing his own behavior, that is, leaving the priesthood and marrying. Was *Psychological Behavior* truly objective or was there a bias inherent in the study design?

Psychology, or the study of the human mind had traditionally been based on Aristotle's rational psychology. Aristotle taught that the human person was a rational animal, that is a corporeal animal who was uniquely different in that he, unlike other animals, had an intelligence and a will. The intellect could know what was appropriate behavior and the will could choose it. St. Thomas Aquinas Christianized, if you will, Aristotle's psychology by emphasizing the value of habitual good behavior, otherwise known as virtues, such as justice and temperance, which includes sexual control. Chastity is an aspect of the classic virtue of temperance and is nowhere considered in Kennedy's book. It is contrary to the end, or purpose, of man to be unjust or promiscuous. What is contrary to the purpose of man was, to use an old-fashioned word, sinful.

The classic psychology persisted until the Enlightenment when, for a variety of reasons, it broke down. The scientific revolution, to summarize, shifted the emphasis in psychology from the metaphysical to the scientific. The scientific was the physical, the observable, the measurable. Experimental psychology, with Wundt and Helmholtz, became popular. What began modern psychology was its apparent ability to explain observable mental illness. The work of Charcot and Messmer culminated in Freud's theory of the unconscious.

The driving force of the unconscious was the libido or, at its basic, sex. In the 1920s and 1930s, the theory was used to explain everything, not just mental illness but also art, economics, and culture. Psychological theory, as taught in Catholic institutions, including seminaries, had been

Aristotelian until the 1920s when Freudian influences began to predominate. The Freudian influence of libido and sex was held in check by a rather rigid moral theology until Vatican II. While the teachings of Vatican II were traditional, there were themes emphasized that were compatible with what could be interpreted as the spirit of Freud. The old emphasis on the virtues and sin became an emphasis on "love" and its physical expression. Self-control, and a discipline such as chastity, became repressive and self-expression was promoted. In a word, Catholic psychologists and those they influenced, seminary formation directors and moral theologians, bought the Freudian package. Perhaps most damaging were the majority of treatment centers for sick priests that promoted a Freudian sexual agenda and oftentimes made priests sent there clinically worse.

Kennedy's book is the epitome of the whole process. He evaluated 271 priests with psychological questionnaires and testing. He did not evaluate for the virtue of temperance and its corollary, chastity. The bias was Freudian and the conclusions were predictable. Kennedy declared that ninety-two percent of the priests were psychosexually retarded and therefore not normal.

Unfortunately, Kennedy was quite influential. Many priests, as he himself did, left the priesthood. Many others remained priests and, imbued with the Freudian spirit, began acting out their sexuality, many by homosexual outlets. Since priests oftentimes have access to adolescent males, either as altar boys or seminarians, sexual abuse became more common.

A homosexual subculture developed in some clerical circles and some seminaries. The abuses proliferated and began to become public, particularly since 1985. The bishops, while some were compliant with the sensualistic agenda, in general wanted to protect the reputation of the Church, keep victims from publicity, and rehabilitate the abusing priests, engaged in what in reality could be considered a cover-up.

In fact, it can be argued that the acknowledgment of sexual sin and a fear of damnation prevented sexual acting out. The removal of these old-fashioned restraints was followed by an increase of sexual abuse and the resultant publicity.

It is of interest that even prior to 1970 there were serious scientific challenges to the simplistic assumptions and biased proofs of doctrinaire Freudianism. In essence, it was positivistic and materialistic. There is a transcendent dimension to the human person. A person can choose non-material behavior such as chastity and, not only not be abnormal but, actually be virtuous. These dimensions of the human person should have been factored into the psychological testing and formation of priests.

Solution

Some have advocated eliminating the rule of celibacy and ordaining women as priests as a solution to the priestly sexual problem. Neither celibacy nor absence of women priests have caused the current problem and, while they may be trendy ideas, will not solve it. A homosexual tendency in some priests, seminaries and bishops, and a toleration by all three, has resulted in an increase in priest sexual abuse among some of the clergy which is but a form of homosexual behavior.¹¹ This has become criminal in those priests and bishops who involve minors.

The solution to this very real but media exaggerated priest sex abuse scandal is twofold. Short term, allegations of recent abuse must be promptly investigated and if substantiated 1) the priest should be removed from ministry, 2) the civil authorities notified, 3) the victims ministered to. Long term, the psychological theory underlying priestly formation and daily life should not be sensualistic and Freudian. It must be based on an Aristotelian rational psychology that values the virtues, including temperance.²⁰ Chastity is an aspect of temperance that recognizes the value and place of asceticism in human life, especially that of the priest, who is striving for perfection, as we all are, but in a special way.

These truths are countercultural in our materialistic and sensate society. The Church has no choice. Its operative psychology must not be Freudian but rather the rational psychology of Aristotle. The Church cannot continue to compromise.

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Table 1.**Sexual Abuse Rates**

CATEGORY	RATE	COMMENTS	REFERENCE
Parents	50%	Of sexual abusers are parents	3
College Men	9.2%	Sexual abuse and assault	6
College Men	14.5%	Rape, attempted rape & sexual assault	7
College Men	15%	Date rape	8
College Men	65%	Sexual misconduct, including sexual assault & coercive sex	9
Protestant Clergy	10%	Are sexual abusers	10
Protestant Clergy	2-3%	Are pedophiles	10
Catholic Clergy	1.7%	Are sexual abusers	11
Catholic Clergy	0.2%	Are pedophiles	11
Homosexuals	34-35%	Of pedophiles are homosexuals	12-14

Table 2.**Scope of Problem***

60s and 70s	2-3 cases per year
1985	Gauche publicity
1982-1992	400 Catholic clergy accused of sexual abuse
1984-1986	135 Priests reported to the nunciature
1986-1988	17 cases per year
1990-1991	19 cases per year
2002	Boston: Geoghan publicity
2002 through April	171 cases

*Compiled from Jenkins⁴

Table 3.

Cost*

Archdiocese of Chicago	Assets: 1984 2-3 billion
Catholic Church in the U.S.	Assets: 1986 200 billion
Sex abuse liability	50 million per year by 1990
Sex abuse liability	400 million per year by 1992
	One billion per year by 2000

*Compiled from Jenkins⁴