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**Celibacy and the Child
Sexual Abuse Crisis**

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Celibacy has received a great deal of media attention recently due to the well-publicized sexual abuse crisis in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church. The *Boston Globe* reported in January 2002 that a Roman Catholic priest had sexually abused 138 children over 30 years as a parish priest and that religious superiors including Cardinal Bernard Law knew about the sexual abuse allegations and did nothing to stop them. After national and international media began to investigate these and other allegations of child sexual abuse committed by priests, within just a few months approximately 255 American priests including several bishops were accused of child sexual abuse and volunteered, or were forced, to resign. The Church has paid almost a billion dollars in legal settlements regarding child abuse allegations during the past 20 years.

In trying to understand the child sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, many people, both within and outside of the church, have wondered if the celibacy vow required of priests might contribute to or even cause the sexual victimization of children, might force these men to develop sexual perversions and disorders such as pedophilia.

It is difficult for most people to understand celibacy. Engaging in sexual activity with others seems to be a basic and universal human need such as the need for eating and drinking. Sexual freedoms are highly valued in the United States and Western culture as well. The average American finds it "weird" to voluntarily give up their rights to be sexually active. Furthermore, many believe that anyone who does voluntarily give up their rights to be sexually active must be "weird" or psychologically "sick" to begin with.

I have evaluated or treated in psychotherapy approximately 150 Roman Catholic priests, nuns, and applicants to Catholic religious life during the past 14 years. I edited a book on sex-offending priests, *Bless Me Father For I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests* (1999), and collaborated with colleagues from across North America on this topic. Finally, I have evaluated or treated about 40 priests accused of sexual involvement with minors as well as about a dozen victims of priestly sexual abuse.

Celibacy does not, in and of itself, put

someone at higher risk to sexually abuse children. The best available data suggests that approximately only two to five percent of male clergy, regardless of religious tradition, can be expected to sexually engage with minors below the age of 18 while approximately eight percent of adult men in general have had a sexual experience with a minor. (This data comes from numerous sources including published research, police records, and data collected from treatment facilities that specialize in this area.) If someone cannot have sex for reasons such as an inability to secure a suitable sexual partner, a marital or other relational conflict, or religious reasons, young children do not become the object of their sexual desire. Further, no research exists to support the notion that applicants to the priesthood are more sexually disturbed than others.

There may be a variety of reasons to criticize the celibacy requirement for Catholic priests and nuns. These are well articulated in the article by Massimini. However, sexual abuse of children is not one of them.

If not celibacy, then what might contribute to sexual crimes against minors committed by priests? Two-thirds of sex-offending priests were sexually abused as children. Most experience other severe psychiatric problems such as alcoholism, mood disorders, personality disorders, and even brain damage. Most are unable to maintain satisfying adult relationships. Most of these men entered seminary as teenagers 30 or more years ago. Few if any psychological evaluations were conducted for clergy applicants and little if any training was offered for managing sexual impulses and needs.

If sexual abuse of minors by priests is less common than abuse by men in general and on par with abuse by male clergy from other religious traditions, then why does the Catholic Church get so much media attention about this topic? Mostly this is due to ineffective leadership that has allowed a small number of priests to continue abusing children over many years. While most religious traditions have checks and balances through lay boards of directors who hire, fire, and evaluate their clergy, the hierarchical and patriarchal Catholic Church does not. While the celibacy vow may not put a priest at higher risk for sexual crimes against children, it does lend itself to more media interest when the vow is violated.

The Catholic Church is the largest continuously operating organization in the world, representing 20 percent of the planet's six billion people. It has tried to be *the* moral authority for 2000

years. The Church's often unpopular position and standards on sexual behavior associated with contraception use, unmarried people, homosexuality, and divorce make sex crimes committed by priests even more scandalous. When they err, or sin and fall from grace, it is a bigger drop than for ministers from other religious traditions who are more like us, who are married with children and mortgages. Many of the 25 percent of Americans who identify themselves as Catholic have mixed feelings about the Church. Millions who experienced Catholic education have stories about priests and nuns who were demanding; many felt they couldn't measure up to the impossibly high standards. The current media attention is a way to get back at the church organization and clergy that contributed to the public's feeling sinful or inadequate. Perhaps the gospel verse attributed to Jesus, "He who is without sin may cast the first stone," is a poignant perspective of the media and public's view on clergy sexual abuse.

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