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Thomas G. Plante
Santa Clara University, tplante@scu.edu

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BY THOMAS G. PLANTE

Professor, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University

Clergy Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church:

WHAT DO WE KNOW AND WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO?

Few recent topics have received the kind of media attention, heated debate, and discussion than the topic of sex-offending clergy, their victims, and supervisors. It is a story about too many bishops (and priests) behaving badly when they are purported to be the moral, religious, and ethical leaders of society. It is a remarkable story. However, it is a complex story that has had little scholarship and discourse driven by thoughtfulness, civility, and reason.

During May 2003, Santa Clara hosted an international conference to bring together some of the best minds in the world on this topic in order to shed some light on the problem of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. The conference was funded primarily by the Bannan Center for Jesuit Education but also received support from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, the SCU President's Office, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Center for Professional Development. The conference also sought to produce a scholarly book, *Sin Against the Innocents: Sex Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church* (Plante, 2004), to be published by Greenwood Press. The book is a companion to an earlier book on this topic that was also published by Greenwood and edited by me in

1999, *Bless Me Father for I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests*. The May 2003 conference and resulting book project included leading journalists, theologians, canon and civil lawyers, ethicists, victim advocates, and mental health professionals from the United States, Canada, England, and Italy who gathered to better understand the challenges of clergy sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church following the crisis of 2002 in the American Church. In doing so, we sought to discuss, debate, and outline a state-of-the-art understanding of this important problem from multiple perspectives. Each chapter was read and discussed among the group and feedback was provided to the contributors for inclusion in their final chapters.

Sexual abuse of minors committed by Roman Catholic priests is a problem that has existed throughout the world and throughout the long history of the Catholic Church. Although a clear minority of all Catholic clergy (accounting for perhaps 2 to 6 percent with the majority of these offenders targeting post-pubescent adolescent boys), some priests have tragically chosen to become sexually engaged with children or younger adolescents. Most of these men who abuse minors experienced child sexual abuse when they were young and currently suffer from a variety of co-morbid psychiatric problems including substance abuse, personality, mood, and organic brain disorders. Some of these men are amenable to treatment while others are not. Victims usually are especially vulnerable due to their age at the time of abuse, trust in the priest

even if priests were allowed to marry and if all homosexual clergy were banished from the priesthood.

The high frequency of sexual abuse throughout the world does not excuse priests or the Catholic Church for this behavior. It would be a significant problem if only one priest sexually abused one child anywhere in the world. We rightfully expect much better behavior from clergy than from the general population of men. We expect priests and other clergy members to set an ethical, moral, and spiritual standard that is higher than what is expected of others. We expect priests to be closer to and more like God, bridging the gap between what is human and divine. Many may argue that if the percentage of priests who sexually abuse minors is not significantly

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and the Church, and personal and family stresses that typically have occurred among victims who may seek out the spiritual and pastoral counsel of a clergy member. The number of clergy sexually involved with consenting adults is impossible to know at this time. Although the problem of clergy sexual abuse is not new, the intense media attention, public outcry, and numerous lawsuits are indeed new.

Tragically, sexual abuse of children and adolescents can be found in every area of the world and in every profession that has access to minors. Furthermore, since persons of varying sexual orientations as well as non-celibate clergy choose to sexually abuse minors, blaming this problem solely on the celibacy vow or on those who maintain a homosexual orientation is unreasonable. Celibacy and homosexual orientations cannot uniquely be blamed for the problem of sexual abuse committed by priests. Clearly, sexual abuse of minors by priests would likely continue

higher than among male clergy from other faith traditions or from the general population of men, then why does the Catholic Church appear to be so plagued by this problem? While there are many possible explanations for this phenomenon a few will be highlighted here. First, there are about 45,000 active priests in the United States while there have been about 150,000 during the past 40 to 50 years. Therefore, if the 2 to 6 percent figure of sex-offending clergy is accurate, then we can expect to have between about 1,000 and 3,000 sex-offending priests currently (or until recently) working in ministry. This number swells to between about 3,000 and 10,000 if we consider all of the priests working in ministry in the United States during the past half century. Research from the St. Luke's Institute that specializes in the treatment of sex-offending priests suggests that the average number of victims per priest is about eight. Therefore, we could expect up to 100,000 victims of priest sexual abuse during the past 40 to 50 years. One notable case in

Boston, which received intense media attention, had 138 victims.

More importantly, however, is how the Church structure manages these issues when they come to light. Most faith traditions have some kind of lay board of directors who hire, fire, and evaluate their clergy. In a nutshell, clergy from other traditions are on a shorter leash than Catholic clergy. If a particular religious superior such as a bishop does not manage a complaint or a problem with his clergy very well, then the virus of sexual abuse can spread rapidly. Moving problematic clergy from parish to parish without input from various lay boards of directors allows clergy sexual predators to continue to victimize vulnerable children and others. If someone doesn't like how a bishop or religious superior makes decisions, then what recourse exists? Bishops and priests are not elected to office and do not have contracts that are renewed with input from lay boards. So, while the percentage of clergy who victimize minors and others may not be significantly different across the various faith traditions, the number of victims and the ability to avoid intervention and potential prosecution can be quite

different across the faith traditions, which can result in more victims per perpetrator in the Catholic tradition.

The Church could have done more over the years to prevent sexual abuse from occurring. Victims and their families could have been treated with more respect and compassion. Offending clergy could have been treated quickly and relieved from duties that placed them in contact with potential victims. The current media attention to sex-offending clergy has acted as a spotlight to examine this problem more closely and to hopefully develop interventions at both individual and institutional levels. The problem of sex-offending clergy can be complex and often lacks simple answers. However, there are strategies and procedures that have been successfully used with other populations (such as mental health professionals) that can be used with the Church. We can perhaps never totally eliminate abuse of children among the ranks of clergy or any occupational profession but we can do much more to minimize the risk. At stake is the moral and spiritual authority of the Church as well as the well-being of countless priests and laypersons.

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During the conference at Santa Clara in May, Thomas Plante (left), SCU professor of psychology, participated in one of the seminars to discuss chapters in the forthcoming book: *Sin Against the Innocents: Sex Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church*, which Plante will edit.



JOHN VONDOLLEN

So, where do we go from here? The following is a list of nine important principles for the future.

1. Protect children and families. The first priority must be the protection of children and vulnerable adults. Certainly, anyone who has a sexual predilection towards children does not belong in their company.

2. The Church must be responsible and accountable. Church officials must take responsibility and be accountable for their policies and procedures to ensure that their clergy do not victimize others.

3. Attorneys and insurance carriers can only help so much. While attorneys and insurance carriers must be involved with helping the Church cope with an onslaught of lawsuits, the Church must answer to a higher moral and ethical authority and perhaps have much higher standards to uphold relative to secular institutions.

4. The Church should not forget its spiritual and moral tradition. There is a Gospel-based accountability to uphold religious, moral, and ethical standards and not to simply do what might be the most practical or expedient.

5. Zero tolerance has some appeal although must be considered carefully. While zero tolerance is a concept that has a great deal of popular support, there are many complex issues that make zero tolerance easier said than done. Furthermore, many call for the defrocking of sex-offending clergy. If the primary goal is to protect children from abuse, defrocking a priest may not be in the best interest of keeping children and vulnerable others safe. The Church can use the vow of obedience to ensure that sex-offending clergy stay far away from children and others forever. This level of control cannot occur in secular society once someone is released from prison.

6. Universality and clarity are needed in policies and procedures. Policies regarding how to deal with accusations of sexual misconduct by clergy in terms of what the victims and

accused can expect must be made clear across the land. These policies must be easy to understand. Model programs demonstrating best practices need to share their methods with others to maximize the chances that good strategies and methods are used everywhere.

7. Research is needed. It is hard to solve important problems unless good data are available to help inform policy and procedures. It would be productive to complete comprehensive research studies that can help us make decisions based on the best available data.

8. Keep the light on. Michael Rezendes from the *Boston Globe* completes his chapter by stating that the *Boston Globe* Spotlight Team shed light on a very dark place and call us to continue keeping this light on the darkness. This image is an important one. Much good can ultimately come out of the crisis in the American Catholic Church if policies and procedures are developed to minimize the sexual victimization of minors in the present and future. The Church has much to lose yet much to gain from the recent crisis. Furthermore, the light shed on the sexual victimization of children can be directed to all places where children are victimized both in and outside of the Catholic Church.

9. Follow the example of Jesus. Lessons from the Gospel should help inform all of the Church's actions. Common sense and compassion must be the order of the day rather than hysteria and rage. Perhaps we should consider the words of Jesus himself as quoted in Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew: "Be compassionate, therefore, as your heavenly Father is compassionate." ✱



Thomas G. Plante
*Professor,
 Department
 of Psychology,
 Santa Clara University*