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Four Lessons Learned from Treating Catholic Priest Sex Offenders

Thomas G. Plante¹

Abstract Perhaps there is no one in our society more despised and vilified than sex offenders, especially those who sexually violate young children. And during the past decade perhaps no particular subgroup of sex offender has been more despised than those who are Roman Catholic priests. We need to be attentive to the state-of-the-art facts, best practices, and create policies and procedures to keep those who might harm children away from children. To do otherwise is foolish and harmful. Yet strong opinions, advocacy, and hysteria sometimes gets more attention than actual evidence-based quality research and practice which is not ultimately in the best interest of child protection efforts. This brief paper reviews lessons learned in working with sex offending clerics within the Roman Catholic tradition.

Keywords : Clergy Sex Offenders, Catholic Church, Pedophiles, Evidence-Based practice

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Since January 6, 2002, when the *Boston Globe* released an investigative report (Boston Globe Investigative Staff, 2002) on widespread sexual abuse of children within the Archdiocese of Boston until now the Roman Catholic Church has been in the news almost daily regarding stories about sexual abuse within the Church. These horrific stories are not only about the clerics who are accused of sexually violating children but also about how the Catholic Church hierarchy covered up these offenses and moved offending clerics from parish to parish, spreading sexual victimization like a virus and protecting their reputations rather than the victims of abuse. Victim advocacy groups and their attorneys, rank-and-file Catholics, and even the general public who may have nothing to do with the Catholic Church have been outraged by the scandal. It seems that everyone has opinions about it, and most seem to be highly critical of the Church for the way they have handled the crisis. Talk to almost anyone about this topic and watch them foam at the mouth with rage.

For the past 25 years I have evaluated and treated about 50 sex-offending priests in the Catholic Church. I know many of them rather well. Some I have known for many years, treating them regularly in my private clinical practice as a psychologist in California. Others I have known for only a short period of time while I conduct a psychological evaluation and make recommendations to the Church about what to do with them. Over the past quarter of a century I have learned many lessons about these men as well as our culture, which offers very strong feelings about sex offenders in general and clerical sex offenders in the Catholic Church in particular. In this brief essay I would like to highlight four of these lessons learned. All names and identifying information have been altered to protect patient confidentiality

Not all sex offenders are the same

Most people seem to think that all sex offenders are the same. They are creepy guys with shifty eyes. They have stubble on their face and wear trench coats, perhaps to expose themselves to children when given the chance to do so. They can't control their impulses at all when around children and will snatch them up out of the blue to sexually violate them whenever given the opportunity. As for Catholic priests who sexually abuse children, they violate altar boys before and after Mass and have a long string of these victims to their name. Frankly, in my 25 years working with clerical sex offenders I have never met even one person who remotely fits this stereotype. Perhaps, like ice cream, sex offenders come in many different flavors. Here are a few examples.

Fr. Jim was a young and newly ordained priest working in his first priestly assignment at a Catholic high school. Since he wasn't that much older than the students at the school, his religious superior thought that he would work well in youth ministry and could help out with some of the student extracurricular activities offered by the school. Since Fr. Jim was a talented musician and artist, he was asked to supervise and direct the yearly high school variety show. Putting on a high school musical and variety show was a lot of fun and resulted in many hours of intense work with the students over many weeks and months. After the show was over there were cast parties and lots of celebration for a job well done. During the intensity of the close interactions between Fr. Jim and some of the students, Fr. Jim and one of the female high school seniors engaged in some romantic kissing after the cast party when everyone (including both the students and Fr. Jim) had consumed a few beers. The drinking age was 18, so most of the graduating seniors were allowed to drink beer. The next morning Fr. Jim was mortified by his behavior and apologized to the high school girl he had kissed, who was then age 17. For the next 60 years Fr. Jim worked as a priest in a variety of different ministries without incident. Once the

Boston Globe put the issue of clergy abuse in the national spotlight, however, the girl whom Fr. Jim had kissed at the cast party (now age 77) reported her experiences to church and civil authorities. Once Fr. Jim was confronted with the report, he freely admitted to his behavior and broke down in tears. He admitted to this lapse in behavior and judgment some 60 years earlier and felt terrible for his behavior. He was pulled from ministry, defrocked, sent to a retirement facility, and became both depressed and suicidal.

Fr. Dave was also a newly ordained priest and was on a backpacking trip with a male high school senior from the Catholic high school and minor seminary where he worked in campus ministry activities. Fr. Dave was struggling with his identification as a homosexual man during the 1970s when priests were encouraged to be “regular people” with the laity. He had entered seminary during the more conservative pre-Vatican II period in the late 1950s and came out following Vatican II during more tumultuous Church and cultural times. During one evening on the trip, when Fr. Dave and the teen were in their sleeping bags, the priest attempted to cuddle the student. The teen rejected Fr. Dave’s advances, and the priest stopped and apologized profusely for his misreading of cues and his sexual advances. Fr. Dave had a long and distinguished career as a priest until the teen, now in his 40s, contacted authorities to report his experience as a youth many years ago. Again, like Fr. Jim in the example above, once Fr. Dave was confronted with the teen’s report, he freely admitted to his behavior and was remorseful. He admitted that he was a confused young priest at the time and that he was unsure how he should respond to his sexual identification issues and impulses. In hindsight, he was mortified by his behavior and poor judgment. He was immediately pulled from ministry and defrocked, and he became both depressed and suicidal.

Fr. Matt acted as a swim coach for a Catholic all-boys K-12 school for many years. He would regularly give members of his swim team massages before and after swim meets, conduct “physical exams” with some of the boys that included touching their genitals, and was accused of masturbating several boys during massage during his 20 years at the school. Fr. Matt admitted to the accusations but denied that he was abusive in any way, stating that he “did the kids a favor.” He reported that he cared for the boys, taught them many lessons for life, and helped them to become men. He stated that masturbating some of them helped them to “get their ya-ya’s out” so that they could better focus on their swimming rather than girls and other sexual matters. He said it relaxed them. Fr. Matt was pulled from ministry, defrocked, and sent to a correctional facility after criminal charges were filed. After his release he was institutionalized by the church in a secure location and supervised around the clock.

As we can see in these three examples, not all sex-offending clergy are the same. While some had numerous victims over many years and were thus serial offenders, others had just a few or just one victim. While any sexual victimization of youth by adults, including priests, is unacceptable, immoral, and of great concern, some of these men were predatory while others acted with poor judgment on one occasion, with alcohol involved that clouded their impulse control and decision-making abilities. The point here is that these sex offenders are not all the same.

In fact, far from the stereotype of clergy sex offenders as having hundreds of victims, the average number of victims of clergy sex offenders, according to the independent John Jay College of Criminal Justice reports (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011), was three victims per offender, with just over 50% of offenders having one known victim. Additionally, these reports also concluded that only 10% of clergy sex offenders targeted pre-pubescent

minors, with the majority either targeting post-puberty teens or whomever they could access (i.e., boys or girls of any age); those in the latter category are “situational generalists.”

So, sex offenders in the Catholic Church, and in general, are not all the same at all. Their offending behavior, interpersonal dynamics, preferred victim targets, and taking risks all differ. Stereotypes are just that, stereotypes that certainly don’t provide a true picture of many of the men accused of sexually violating youth.

Not all offenders should get the same treatment

Most people think that all sex offenders should be and need to be incarcerated and that none of them can control their evil impulses to harm children. Just as sex offenders aren’t all the same, the smartest way to treat them varies, too. Obviously, anyone who commits a crime needs to be held accountable for their actions, and both law enforcement and the criminal justice system should do its part both to protect the public and hold criminals accountable.

Additionally, common sense tells us that anyone with a predilection to sexually engage with minor children or teens shouldn’t have unsupervised or even any access to youth. So it is prudent, regardless of incarceration or legal status within the criminal justice system, that all sex offenders stay out of professions, careers, or volunteer work that grants them access to minors. This is why it is nearly impossible now for someone with a history of sex offending to get any position, paid or voluntary, with a school, church, youth sports, Scouts, or other activities that would provide them with ready access to and supervision over minors.

However, treatment of offenders varies, just as the offenders themselves vary. For example, treatment for Fr. Jim above would look very different for Fr. Matt (and it should). Fr. Jim, showing poor judgment, committed a one-time indiscretion with a teenage girl just a few

years younger than him more than 60 years ago, while Fr. Matt was a serial offender violating numerous teens over a 20-year period. Fr. Jim was mortified by his behavior while Fr. Matt felt that he had done nothing wrong. Two clergy in trouble but very different situations altogether.

Additionally, many clergy offenders have different patterns of co-morbidity (i.e., other psychiatric diagnoses) that may contribute to their abusive histories. These typically include depression, personality disorders, brain injury, and substance abuse troubles. For some, for example, once the alcohol troubles are adequately addressed their risk of sexual victimization is eliminated.

Sex offenders are human, too

We tend to envision sex offenders are monsters. We certainly want our children protected from abuse from sex offenders, but we tend to live in a culture that experiences sex offenders as horrific monsters, not human beings at all, and believe that they should be severely punished if not executed. Without excusing their behavior, we need to keep in mind that sex offenders, even clerical sex offenders, are very human and have many human troubles, challenges, and pathologies. Here's an example.

Fr. Tim came from a lower-middle-class background with an emotionally and physically abusive father. He was the oldest of five children and typically the brunt of his father's abuse. His mother was cold and distant, and the home was a miserable place to be. All of his siblings had serious mental health and behavioral troubles due at least in part to the abusive home environment. As a young priest, Fr. Tim was accused of sexually violating several family members and parishioners. Fr. Tim admitted that he had poor social skills, was lonely, and was chronically depressed. He admitted that he found solace in hugging and kissing some relatives

and parishioners, including minors. While he denied any genital contact with anyone, including minors, he admitted that he kissed and hugged kids more for his own needs than anything else. He is ashamed by his behavior, remorseful, and has experienced suicidal feelings as well. Although not defrocked, he is mandated to live in a secluded church facility that has no access to children or to the public. He can't leave the facility unless accompanied by someone who knows of his troubles and can supervise him at all times.

I've treated Fr. Tim for 17 years. Once the accusations against him came to light, civil and church authorities were informed and he was pulled from ministry. I have treated him for depression. Fr. Tim is very socially awkward, frustrated by his many restrictions, and remorseful for what he did to harm children as well as tarnish the reputation of priests and the Catholic Church. He's human. Flawed for sure, but human nonetheless. And my job is to treat his depression and help him cope with his troubles. He's not a monster. He has no interest in being around children. He is a sad, lonely, and flawed human being.

“Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts”

This famous quote from the late New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan is often on my mind as I reflect on clergy sex offenders and how our society, culture, and media have managed the issue of sex-offending clerics in the Catholic Church. It seems that everyone has opinions on the matter—and strong ones! Yet, few people are really interested in the facts. We now know about a lot of clergy sex offenders and have a great deal of quality evidence-based information so that we can keep those at risk of harming children out of ministry and protect the public from harm (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011; Francis & Turner, 1995; Plante, 2003; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002). Yet, it seems that the public isn't very

interested in this information unless it underscores their particular point of view. For example, many strongly believe that sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is much more common than sexual abuse that occurs in non-Catholic churches or within the general public and that the demands of celibacy are at the root of the problem (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011; Shakeshaft, 2004; Young & Griffith, 1995). Research has clearly shown that this is not true, yet most people still believe it.

Recently a reporter from one of the Los Angeles newspapers contacted me to discuss clergy abuse in the Catholic Church. I have received countless calls from the media on this topic over many years. The reporter started the conversation by saying that he was having a great deal of trouble finding anyone who seems objective on the topic of clergy abuse in the Catholic Church and doesn't have some strong agenda to pursue. He said that victims and their advocacy groups never seem to be satisfied or pleased with anything that the Catholic Church does to correct the problems of the past while Church officials seems highly defensive and can't admit to any current wrongdoing, saying that all of these problems are now in the distant past. Perhaps both perspectives have a certain truth to them.

I have to agree with the reporter's concern and point of view. Even at professional academic conferences where I am presenting empirical research on this topic that is quantitative and published in quality peer-reviewed professional outlets, I occasionally receive angry and emotional responses to the research data. And this anger comes from fellow professionals who have nothing at all to do with the Church or abuse victims.

If our society has any prayer of creating a culture where children are safe in the presence of adults and free from sexual abuse, then only high-quality and evidence-based research,

practices, and policies will help. Emotions, stereotyping, and hysteria really won't help at all and will likely just make things a whole lot worse.

So, everyone is certainly entitled to their own opinions, but if we truly want to ensure that we do all that we can to live in a world as free as possible of sexually victimized children, we really do need to be attentive to the state-of-the-art facts and to use them, regardless of our point of view, to create policies and procedures to keep those who might harm children away from children and to treat these human beings with sexual predilections towards children with quality services to help them help themselves. To do otherwise is foolish and harmful, to them and to our children (Plante, 2004a, 2004b).

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