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# Six principles to consider when working with Roman Catholic clients

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## Six Principles to Consider when Working with Roman Catholic Clients

### Abstract

Although the majority of Americans consider themselves to be Christian and affiliated with various Protestant denominations, a quarter of the American population identify themselves as Roman Catholics who are the largest single religious denomination in the country. Yet, surprisingly, fairly little research has been published in the professional psychology literature about working with this very large and diverse group. Psychologists have an ethical responsibility to be aware of and respectful to diversity including diversity based on religious background, affiliation, and perspectives. The purpose of this brief reflection is to offer six important principles to keep in mind for professional psychologists to consider when they work with Roman Catholic clients. These include attending to Catholic diversity and multiculturalism, attending to issues beyond sexual ethics and sexual victimization, being aware of theological diversity of beliefs and practices, and securing consultation with Catholic clerics. We must proactively keep ourselves abreast of these issues in order to best serve our clients and the public.

Keywords: Catholic, psychotherapy, multiculturalism, ethics

Although the majority of Americans consider themselves to be Christian and affiliated with various Protestant denominations, a quarter of the American population identify themselves as Roman Catholics (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008). Catholics are the largest single religious denomination in the country representing 24% of the population or 78 million people (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008). With few notable exceptions (e.g., Shafranske, 2000) fairly little research has been published in the professional psychology literature about working with this very large and diverse group. This is curious since there has been much more research published on significantly smaller religious, ethnic, and cultural groups than on Roman Catholics (Hood, Hill, & Spika, 2009).

The Roman Catholic community is a remarkably diverse one that is also closely embedded into various ethnic and cultural groups as well. For example, Catholics coming from cultural traditions originating in Mexico, Argentina, the Philippines, Vietnam, Poland, and so forth may present with very unique traditions, expectations, and issues that blend both religious and cultural differences.

Since professional psychologists often don't come from the Roman Catholic religious tradition they may know fairly little about the influences the Church and the religious tradition might have on many of their clients (Kugelman, 2011; Plante, 2009, 2013; Shafranske, 2000). Sadly, most psychologists may only know what they read about in popular press reports about the Catholic Church which tends to focus on Church scandals and sexual ethics. Personally, I have been amazed at how little most psychologists know about the Roman Catholic Church and how often stereotyping and bias is manifested in conversations and in professional consultations.

The purpose of this brief reflection is to offer several important principles to keep in mind for professional psychologists to consider when they work with Roman Catholic clients.

These principles have often been helpful to me and my colleagues working with Catholic clerics and laypersons alike for many decades. They are based on years of clinical experience and highlight the issues that seem to be especially salient, at least to this author.

1. Diversity within the Roman Catholic community is enormous.

Many professionals often underestimate the remarkable diversity within the Roman Catholic Church. With over one billion members spread across the globe differences in perspectives, language, traditions, economics, and so forth create a remarkable degree of cultural diversity. In addition to language, culture, race, and ethnicity there is a tremendous theological diversity within the Church as well. Theologically, some Catholic clerics, as well as laypersons, are highly conservative while others are very liberal. Some highlight dogma, doctrine, and liturgical purity while others focus on social justice issues such as poverty and other problems of inequality and human suffering. Some clerics and laypersons agree with much of the Church rules for behavior including sexual ethics of contraception use, abortion, homosexuality, and divorce while others completely disagree with the Church's position on these and other matters. Professional psychologists should not underestimate the wide range of beliefs, practices, and perspectives found among those who identify themselves as Roman Catholics and who present themselves to psychologists for professional services.

Perhaps a few brief clinical examples can provide a sense for this diversity. The cases presented in this paper are real but details have been altered to protect confidentiality.

*Mrs. A is a devout Catholic who suffers from panic disorder and agoraphobia. She comes from a highly conservative Irish Catholic background. She attends daily Mass and participates in a variety of daily devotional practices. Since she suffers from panic and agoraphobia she often skips the often crowded Sunday Mass preferring to attend the smaller*

*early morning daily Mass during the workweek. She believes that she is committing a grave sin by failing to attend services on church holy days of obligation typically offering excuses to her friends, family, and fellow parishioners. She feels especially guilty that she has lied to her parish priest about the reasons for missing Sunday Mass. She is fearful that her deception is a mortal sin and that she'll be punished by God with eternal damnation. These beliefs make her panic symptoms worse. She problematically copes with these feelings by abusing her prescription medication (i.e., Xanax) as well as having a short temper with her husband resulting in further guilt, shame, and fear.*

*Ms. B is a recent college graduate who just completed a year in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, a Catholic organization that places recent college graduates in working and living communities across the country that service those who are poor, marginalized, or oppressed. She worked in an inner city Catholic elementary school acting as a teacher's aide and counselor. Ms. B. is very interested in a career serving the poor. She plans to work in a Catholic Worker home, a program started by Dorothy Day that offers shelter and food to the most marginalized living in urban environments. She is left leaning politically and thinks that many of the Church's rules are "ridiculous and medieval." She practices both yoga and mindfulness meditation and is very open to the religious and spiritual traditions of other groups. Yet, she strongly identifies with the social justice emphasis of the Catholic Church including the liberation theology of Latin America. During college she studied for a term in El Salvador which she described as transformative. Her parents would like her to work in the business world to better support herself and conflicts emerge over their differing visions of her future.*

2. Catholic affiliation is often tied to and embedded in culture.

While the Roman Catholic Church is a global Church with engaged Catholics spread across the globe, it is important to recognize that the Church is often well embedded into the cultural and geography of our clients. Many of these identities and affiliations have been shifting in recent decades and centuries as well. While most Roman Catholics could be found in the northern hemisphere during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of Catholics are now found in the southern hemisphere today (Allen, 2009). Immigration patterns also influence where Catholics reside. For example, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Catholics from Ireland, Italy, Canada, and Poland migrated to the eastern half of the United States while Catholics from Mexico and the rest of Latin America, the Philippines, and Vietnam found themselves primarily in the western part of the United States during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These immigration patterns continue to evolve bringing Catholics with various cultural traditions and perspectives to larger parts of the country (Allen, 2009). The relationship to country of origin, migration patterns, language, and culture create a global Church that goes well beyond mere beliefs, practices, and religious traditions. These are closely embedded into each other and should be considered in working with our clients.

Again, a few clinical examples may provide a sense of this cultural diversity.

*Mr. C is from Mexico as is his family and most of his friends. He is engaged with his Spanish speaking Catholic parish and has great devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. He is stressed by what he experiences as racial discrimination in his office job and often gets angry and frustrated that his colleagues don't take him seriously due to his faith and well as his ethnic identity. When he is asked to work on Sundays he feels that he has to defend his faith commitments not wishing to miss Mass and family time on these holy days of*

*obligation. His devotional practices including regular prayer and religious icons in his office are often ridiculed by some co-workers.*

*Mrs. D was referred to a psychologist by her parish priest due to her worries about being possessed by the devil. She had experienced a range of stressful, disturbing, and uncomfortable impulses as well as upsetting dreams that she concluded were the devil's work. Within her African community her worries were reinforced by her peer group and several clerics. She recently presented herself to a priest who was trained as an exorcist by the Vatican. After a careful psychological evaluation and consultation it was determined that Mrs. D was not psychotic or experienced any kind of delusion or hallucination but rather used the language of devil possession and influence from her cultural tradition to understand and deal with her upsetting impulses and dreams.*

3. Roman Catholics have much more on their plate than sexual ethics.

Most news reports about the Catholic Church focus on variations on the theme of sexual ethics. Stories about the Church's official positions on homosexuality and gay marriage, contraception, abortion, divorce, co-habitation, and issues related to the sexual scandals involving sex offending clerics make frequent news headlines. If one didn't know otherwise, one would assume that all the Catholic Church seems to care about is sex. Nothing could be further from the truth. Catholics maintain diverse points of view (and behavior) about sexual ethics. For example, over 95% of Catholics in America use contraception and Catholics supporting marriage equality, abortion rights, and so forth are typical of the views of most Americans who are not Catholic (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005). While sexual ethics in the Church certainly are highlighted in the news, other topics (e.g., poverty, social justice, economic policies, theology) rarely are reported on by the press (Allen, 2009).



4. Catholics clerics very rarely abuse children.

The Catholic Church has experienced a tremendous amount of negative press attention in the past dozen years regarding sexual abuse committed by their priests and religious brothers. Due to the remarkable amount of press attention many believe that Catholic priests are at much higher risk of sexually violating children than other clerics or other men in the general population. Sadly, too many people assume that a Catholic priest is a pedophile whenever they see someone wearing a Roman collar. Research has clearly shown that this assumption is not true. While 4% of Catholic priests had credible accusations of sexual violations of minors during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011), 5-7% of public school teachers had similar accusations (Shakeshaft, 2004). Data examining clerical sexual abuse among other religious traditions have thus far failed to find lower levels of abuse among non-Catholic groups (Francis & Turner, 1995; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011; Plante & McChesney, 2011). Thus, although certainly and clearly horrific and not defensible, Catholic priests are not more likely to sexually violate children than other men. Furthermore, it is startling that research finds that about 15% of men and 30% of women in America report that they were sexually violated as a child by an adult male with about 80% of the offenders being relatives such as step-fathers, uncles, older brothers, and cousins (Finkelhor, 2008). The typical sexual abuse offender is a family member of the victim, certainly not a Catholic cleric.

5. Catholics (including clerics) rarely agree with everything that the Church does or says.

Catholics have their own mind and choose to agree or disagree with official Church teachings and doctrines. They may have unique experiences with and relationship to the liturgical calendar, celebrations, and with religious figures such as God, Jesus, and the many

Catholic saints who act as spiritual models. While the Catholic Catechism (Catholic Church, 2000) offers clear details about the teachings of the church, many people maintain their own views about what is and what is not reasonable beliefs and practices as well as what is and isn't meaningful to them in their religious and spiritual behaviors and views. This is true for both laypersons and clerics. While laypersons are free to express their views of disappointment and disagreement with Church policies and procedures, Catholic clerics ordained in ministry have much less freedom to state what is really on their minds to the public when it comes to the Church. This is probably similar to the lack of freedom many employees might experience considering criticizing their employers. For example, if you work for a large corporation you probably don't publically criticize your company's upper management and company rules without significant consequence. This can be true among clerics in the Catholic Church as well.

Perhaps an example of disagreement with official Church teachings can be instructive.

*Mr. E is a devoted Catholic interested in becoming a priest after several years of careful reflection, discernment, and spiritual direction. He has attended several vocational discernment retreats during the past few years and feels called to parish ministry. However, he considers himself homosexual in orientation but as an engaged and devoted lifelong Catholic he has not acted on his impulses and desires never dating or sexually engaging with men. He went on a few dates in high school and in college attending proms and other special events with females before his sexual orientation was clear to him. He admits to some masturbation experiences but reports that he has been able to control these sexual impulses over the past few years. He is well aware of the Church's position on homosexual priests but he feels that his feelings and impulses are under good control and that he has felt inspired to pursue religious life as a priest after Pope Francis's famous response during an interview about homosexual priests in the Vatican, "Who*

*am I to judge?" Some of his friends and his clerical spiritual director have wondered if switching to a different Church organization that is more welcoming of homosexual men as clerics, pastors, and spiritual leaders might be a good idea. Mr. E rejects this suggestion saying that "being Catholic is in his DNA" and that he just can't imagine leaving the religious tradition that is such an integral part of who he is inside and out. He states, "As long as I follow the vow of chastity, who cares if I'm gay or straight?"*

6. Consulting Catholic clerics is often a good idea.

While psychologists often feel comfortable consulting with a wide variety of appropriate professionals associated with their work with their clients such as physicians, nurses, school teachers, attorneys, and so forth, they generally feel less comfortable consulting with clerics (Plante, 2009, 2013). With appropriate consultation with and permission from their clients, Catholic clerics such as priests and deacons often are happy to assist their congregants by consulting with mental health professionals such as psychologists. When issues unfold where consultation may prove helpful, including Catholic clerics into the conversation may prove invaluable.

Perhaps several consultation examples might prove helpful.

*Deacon F works in youth ministry at a local parish. He mostly works with the teen groups and finds some of their behaviors hard to understand. Deacon F is married but never had children himself. He contacts a local psychologist regularly to bounce questions off of him about what might be normal or abnormal teen behavior. He also refers to the psychologist teens who clearly are in trouble with drugs, alcohol, school and family stress, and self-esteem concerns. The psychologists, with permission from the clients, sometimes includes Deacon F in sessions to better ensure that everyone is "on the same page" in the assessment or treatment process.*

*Fr. G often jokes that he should have been a psychologist before becoming a priest since so much of his work with his congregation members has to do with personal and family struggles. Divorce, separation, acting out children, death and dying issues are all typical challenges Fr. G experiences in a given week. Fr. G. sends a local psychologist referrals and then follows up with periodic consultation visits to ensure that he stays on top of his congregants spiritual needs while also being mindful of their psychological challenges. The psychologist often consults with Fr. G about church issues to better ensure that he is tailoring his interventions to the particular needs of his religious clients and referring them back to Fr. G. when religious, spiritual, and theological questions and issues emerge in therapy.*

### Conclusion

Professional psychologists working with Roman Catholics that include a sizeable percentage of the general population from all walks of life, nationalities, ethnicities, economic statuses, and political views should be mindful of these 6 principles in order to provide better quality and more culturally competent clinical and professional psychological services. Psychologists have an ethical responsibility to be aware of and respectful to diversity including diversity based on religious background, affiliation, and perspectives (American Psychological Association, 2002; Plante, 2009). Being judgmental, overgeneralizing, and stereotyping those from a particular religious tradition, such as Roman Catholicism, is not only ethically problematic and clinically unsound but might result in malpractice claims. In a multicultural environment that includes religious diversity, being attentive to the needs and concerns of client populations takes a good deal of effort and engagement. But this is what we are called to do as professional psychologists and we must proactively keep ourselves abreast of these issues in order to best serve our clients and the public. Readers interested in further information about

working with Catholics in clinical practice might wish to consult additional resources (Kugelmann, 2011; Plante, 2009; Plante & McChesney, 2011; Shafranske, 2000).

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