

Lessons for Seminary Formation Found in the Pages of the John Jay Studies

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For almost ten years, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, with principal researcher Dr. Karen Terry, studied sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergy in the United States. This research was commissioned in 2002 by the National Review Board and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Office of Child and Youth Protection in fulfillment of Article 9 of the bishop's *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. Article 9 reads as follows:

To understand the problem more fully and to enhance the effectiveness of our future response, the National Review Board will also commission a descriptive study, with the full cooperation of our dioceses/eparchies, of the nature and scope of the problem within the Catholic Church in the United States, including such data as statistics on perpetrators and victims.

The research by the John Jay College consisted of two studies. The first study was descriptive, "The Nature and Scope of Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church from 1950 to 2002." The report's description of abuse contained numbers of victims, perpetrators and incidents, included

when and where the abuse occurred and when the abuse was reported to the church. The "Nature and Scope" study was completed in 2004. The second study examined the reasons why the Catholic Church saw a rise in sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with a sharp decline in incidents beginning in 1985. Thus, the focus of the second study was on the actual abuse, not the factors that led to widespread reporting in 2002. The "Causes and Context" study was published in May 2011. Taken together, the discoveries of these two extensive research projects provide a thorough description of the actions that caused the abuse throughout the decades. The findings are perhaps as noteworthy for the theories that were *not* supported as for those that were.

Although numerous facets of the studies can and should be used to shape future decision-making, the following article focuses on the dimensions of the findings that have direct implications for seminary formation and how we conceptualize ongoing formation of clergy within the United States Catholic Church. Readers in other countries may also find these insights relevant.

FINDINGS RELEVANT TO FORMATION

In 2002, when many policy and governance decisions were made, neither leaders nor ordinary people knew with certainty how large or widespread the problem of sexual abuse by clergy was. But with virtually all dioceses and most of the religious communities participating in the John Jay Study, we now have answers we did not have before. So, before delving into the nuances of the conclusions, it is necessary to consider in the broadest terms the findings of the

“Nature and Scope” study and “Causes and Context” study that have implications for formation.

NATURE AND SCOPE FINDINGS

The study of the prevalence of sexual abuse incidents in the Catholic Church from 1950 to 2002 showed a clear and consistent pattern. The number of incidents occurring per year increased steadily from the mid-1960s, peaked at the end of the 1970s and declined sharply in the early-1980s. The number of incidents has remained low since about 1994. Substantial delays in reporting, as are common with incidents of sexual abuse, caused accounts of abuse to be provided decades after the actual abuse occurred.

In the 52-year period, 4,392 priests abused minors. That is about 4 percent of all clergy who served in those years. Approximately 96 percent of clergy who served from 1950 to 2002 did not have an allegation of abuse against them. The critical questions are, “What differentiated the 4 percent who abused from all the others who did not?” and “Of those distinctions, what if anything, has been the role of formation?”

Of the approximately four percent of priests who were accused or found to have abused, 56 percent were alleged to have abused only once. Throughout the 52-year period of study, the number of priests who either had one allegation against them, or whose period of abuse was less than one year, stayed fairly stable. In other words, the numbers of offenders who abused on a lesser, or one-time scale stayed about the same, while the numbers of multiple-victim offenders varied dramatically over these years.

With respect to multiple-victim offenders, the numbers of incidents increased in an irregular but steady pattern throughout the 1960s and 1970s, peaking in the early 1980s and then dropping rapidly following 1985.

In addition, among the more startling results from the John Jay analysis is that of all the victims of clergy sexual abuse over the 52-year period, about 3 percent of the offenders accounted for 25 percent of the victims. That is, 137 offenders abused approximately 2600 victims. These persistent offenders differed in many ways from the majority of clergy who abused.

First, of the 1,915 clergy offenders who abused only one victim, the average age at which he committed his first known offense was 41, eleven years after ordination.

Of the 540 clerics who abused four to nine different victims, the average age of the cleric was 35, four years after ordination.

Finally, of the 137 clerics who abused more than 10 victims, the cleric’s average age of first known offense was 30 years old and he normally began abusing during his first year after ordination.

As we begin to discuss “solutions to the problem” we are immediately confronted with the fact that these patterns suggest a need to address problems with significantly heterogeneous sexual offenders of at least two types:

- a) the one-time or limited offender who abused for the first time about ten years after ordination, and
- b) the habitual or multiple offender who abused immediately or shortly after

ordination and in some situations began abusing even prior to ordination.

CAUSES AND CONTEXT

FINDINGS

Within the lengthy report of findings in the “Causes and Context” study are numerous useful pieces of information for professionals working to prevent and respond to sexual abuse, both within and outside the Catholic Church. Following are several key findings with direct implications for formation.

Historical and Cultural Context:

The “Causes and Context” report began with a description of the historical and cultural context in which the sexual abuse crisis occurred. The context is interesting because the rise in cases of Catholic clergy sexual abuse in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the rise in other types of deviant behavior in society such as drug use and crime.

During this time, there was a loosening of social constraints, which led to a statistical increase in both premarital sexual behavior and divorce. For example, from 1972 to 1985, the percentage of Americans who thought that pre-marital sex was “not wrong at all” went from 26 percent to 42 percent. In contrast, this era also saw a shift in the criminal justice system’s treatment of child sexual abuse. Statutory rape and child sexual abuse laws were evolving and becoming more widespread and standardized. By 1990, all states had mandatory reporting laws for child sexual abuse.

One of the more thought-provoking considerations that is contained in the section on historical and cultural contexts is that the characteristics of the Catholic priesthood that have remained consistent throughout the decades,

such as having an all-male clergy and having a commitment to celibate chastity, cannot explain the increase, peak and decrease in abuse incidents. The researchers conclude that any factor that remained constant throughout the timeframe under study cannot be considered a cause for the crisis.

Historical Patterns in the Catholic Church:

The researchers conducted further analysis to determine whether the year of ordination had an effect on whether a priest would later abuse. These calculations confirmed that the year of ordination did have a significant influence on likelihood to abuse.

Fortyfour percent of those later accused were ordained before 1960.

One third of all priest offenders were ordained during the 1940s and 1950s.

Almost half (48 percent) of those who later abused were ordained from 1960 to 1979. This question of cohort, or years in the seminary, also has implications for the questions surrounding the effects of priests’ selfdescribed gender preference and their likelihood to sexually abuse minors, described in the next section.

Trends in Sexuality: The John Jay researchers looked specifically at how seminarians self-identified their sexual preferences.

Prior to the mid-1970s, about three percent of seminarians identified themselves as homosexual,

while in the 1980s and 1990s, about 40 percent of seminarians identified themselves as homosexual. This led the researchers to conclude that a homosexual identity, and even the existence of a

homosexual subculture that was reported to have existed in some seminaries in the 1980s and 1990s, could not account for clergy sexual abuse because the cohorts that produced the most offenders were not the cohorts self-identifying as homosexual and were not the cohorts attending seminary in the 1980s and 1990s.

Those who identified themselves as heterosexual or homosexual were less likely to abuse a minor than those who identified themselves as “confused.”

The condition of being “confused” was most commonly found among those who were ordained prior to the 1960s.

Seminary Education: Regarding seminary education, the John Jay researchers found that priests who abused were not significantly more likely to have attended a minor seminary and were not more likely to have attended a foreign seminary. They were, however, significantly less likely to have participated in human formation while in the seminary. Men ordained before 1960 represent 44 percent of those who abused. Men ordained after 1975 had a lower level of subsequent abuse than those ordained before 1975.

Development of human formation programs and increased attention to the challenges of celibate chastity began in the 1970s and increased substantially throughout the 1980s.

Human formation in the study was defined as focusing on self-knowledge, interpersonal relationships, emotional maturity, human sexuality and psychosexual development and integration, as well as focusing on meeting the challenges of celibacy and chastity in the priesthood.

Ongoing Support An additional important point that is made in this section is that job performance and other kinds of evaluations are usually reserved for the first five years after ordination. In most dioceses, pastors are not obliged to undergo regular assessment. Based on the research, we now know that many priests began abusing years after they were ordained. The abuse often began during times of increased job stress, social isolation and decreased contact with peers. These men may have found that there were few structures in place to help them. The study also showed that many diocesan priests let go of the practice of spiritual direction after only a few years of ordained ministry and that this is associated with a higher risk of all forms of misconduct in ministry. The lack of ongoing professional supervision, accountability and support are all critical considerations for ministers and other high-access positions of trust.

Psychological Explanations: A psychological explanation would be that the priests who went on to sexually abuse minors differed psychologically from other priests who did not abuse minors. In order to consider this explanation, researchers examined clinical data from three treatment centers.

Priests who sexually abused minors were compared to

1. priests who were sexually involved with adults,
2. priests who sought treatment for mental health problems,
3. and with seminarians who had no known problems.

The priests who sought treatment for mental health problems had the most significant measurements for depression, anxiety and addiction potential.

Priests who sexually abused scored the highest on the Dominance Scale, which measures **initiative, confidence and resourcefulness in social relationships**, none of which would be troubling if identified in the absence of behavioral misconduct.

Other strong, but not statistically significant personality markers for priests who sexually abused minors were denial of social anxiety, authority problems, persecutory ideas, amorality and over-controlled hostility. Although each of these personality markers is considered negative, they also are found in a sizeable portion of the normal adult population, including priests who did not sexually abuse. **Overall, the findings indicated that priests who sexually abused cannot yet be reliably differentiated from non-abusive priests, based on psychological testing.**

Behavioral Explanations and Life Experiences:

The John Jay researchers also considered theories that certain childhood and adult life experiences could cause or predispose the priests to abuse minors. Among the primary childhood experiences that were examined were being physically or sexually abused, having major family stressors, substance abuse in the family and mental illness in the family. The adult experiences that were considered were engaging in sexual activities with adults, use of pornography and how the priests viewed their own sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bi-sexual or confused).

Having been sexually abused as a child was the only life experience that was associated with later sexually abusing a child.

The study also found that while having a family that treated sex as a taboo topic was positively associated with post-ordination sexual behavior with **adults**, this factor did not predict a greater likelihood to sexually abuse a child.

With respect to adult sexual experiences, a high percentage of all priests who entered treatment programs did have sexual experiences with adults. Although **having sexual experiences with male or female adults prior to and during seminary formation was a predictor of future sexual activity with adults after ordination**, these behaviors were **not predictive of sexual victimization of a minor.**

Use of **pornography** did not, on its own, predict sexual abuse of a minor. However, use of multiple forms of pornography, such as video, print and cyber-ornography, was associated with sexual abuse of minors.

Personal Life Narratives: One last interesting finding from this section resulted from an examination of priest offenders' personal life narratives. Their narratives were expected to differ significantly from other priests' stories and self-concepts. However, this hypothesis was not supported. In fact, the priest abusers saw themselves very much like other priests saw themselves, including being able to successfully fulfill their role as priest, despite the fact that they were living the life of an abuser.

In conclusion, the findings indicated that while the group of priests who sexually abused minors had some characteristics and experiences that differentiated them from other priests, they were not readily distinguishable from priests who were treated for other reasons nor would they be easily identified in the absence of abuse allegations.

LESSONS LEARNED

☉ ***Allowing even one persistent offender to complete studies and become ordained can lead to vast and incalculable injury and destruction.***

The data suggest that currently these offenders are being effectively screened out prior to reaching the seminary or during the process of formation. However, as challenges continue to pressure the system, it becomes critical to actively ensure that there are no seminarians who complete the process while hiding their true selves from formators. Persistent offenders may have a variety of personality disorders, including narcissism and psychopathology, that are associated with superficial charm, being charismatic and having a talent for manipulation.

This means that a seminarian who does not engage in genuine self-reflection, rigorous honesty and behavioral accountability cannot be permitted to continue seminary studies. While formators have for many years expressed concerns about seminarians who were more guarded and less forthcoming, the findings of the John Jay Study regarding persistent offenders now require that those who guide formation regard these qualities as potentially dangerous.

☉ ***By the time a man is ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood, it is essential that he know and understand his own sexuality and is capable of integrating his own attractions and sexuality into his ministry, rather than attempting to deny their existence.***

Denying one's attractions, ignoring sexual urges and failing to address intimacy needs in appropriate ways are not viable options. The John Jay findings indicate that neither a heterosexual nor homosexual orientation is associated with higher risk to sexually abuse a child, but being confused about one's sexual orientation certainly is. This means that self-awareness regarding sexual orientation and the ability to accept and integrate one's sexuality is needed to produce fully formed priests who recognize and accept their own challenges and vulnerabilities.

This also means that vocation directors and formators should be highly conversant with human sexuality, prepared to discuss topics of sexuality and capable of doing so in concrete, non-judgmental terms that invite further self-disclosure. Knowledge regarding normal human sexuality also allows vocation directors to make recommendations for advancement in the admissions process for seminary and to bring collateral information to psychologists who evaluate a candidate's appropriateness for serving in a life-long position of trust.

✿ ***Honest work regarding celibate chastity is critical to long-term prevention.***

Considering that the use of multiple forms of pornography was associated with a greater likelihood to

abuse, it is likely that issues of sexual addiction, or at least high libido, were components in the larger picture for some clerical offenders. Sexual addiction, compulsive sexual behavior and use of sexual activities as coping strategies typically emerge early in life. If a seminarian has factors such as these in his earlier life it is necessary to treat them as serious impediments to a life of celibate chastity and as potential risk factors for abuse. At times, this is more difficult than it sounds, particularly, when a candidate fails to disclose such information or presents himself as fundamentally changed. This last scenario may invoke the power of conversion and cause leaders to regard the previous patterns of sexual behavior as irrelevant.

*** *Development of intimacy skills is necessary to the formation of emotionally mature men who are capable of meeting their own needs.***

Adults have needs for closeness, self-disclosure, self-acceptance, shared experiences, affection and other intimacy and inter-personal needs. The number and variety of interpersonal relationships needed to meet these needs may vary among individuals, but with few exceptions, all adults have intimacy needs. Meeting these needs takes some confidence and social skill, as well as time and opportunities for sharing conversations and activities. The absence of intimacy in Western culture is generally experienced as loneliness, and loneliness is a common precondition when priests who have already been in ministry for a number of years suddenly begin to initiate inappropriate or sexually abusive relationships with children or young people. Considering that 56

percent of all priests who abused were first known to have abused more than ten years after ordination, it is necessary to take a careful look at their ability to develop and maintain long-term, close and fulfilling intimate relationships with peers.

*** *Across the board, Roman Catholic priests need spiritual direction, professional supervision and other forms of personal support.***

We have established that it is extremely difficult to predict which men in formation will or will not turn out to sexually offend against children and young people.

There is a need for defined, ongoing formation and professional supervision of all priests that is similar to the supervision that is required of other human service professionals. Preventing sexual abuse is one grave reason for needing accountability, but there are numerous dimensions of priestly life and work that would be aided and enhanced through standardized, ongoing guidance and mentoring.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the John Jay studies demonstrate that human formation must continue, and must delve deeper. Changes that were made in human formation programs in seminaries corresponded with the dramatic decrease of sexual abuse incidents in 1985. Although it is difficult at times in the face of so much suffering to recognize the positive changes that helped bring about the decrease in incidents, there is no ignoring that seminaries began

addressing some variables that can lead to clergy sexual abuse. Clearly there were other variables influencing the outcomes as well, but it would be a mistake to devalue the changes that were made or to disregard the role of human formation in the overall decline of clergy sexual abuse. Human formation programs that focus on self-awareness, self-disclosure, interpersonal relationships, human sexuality and emotional maturity are necessary to priestly formation. Self awareness and honesty regarding intimacy needs, sexual feelings, attractions, infatuations and love are needed in order to integrate these human dimensions into a life of priestly ministry.

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