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ANSWERING THE EARTHQUAKE

Jesuit education and the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

By Thomas G. Plante

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body, one Spirit. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12, 26)

One of the many advantages and special contributions of Jesuit Catholic higher education is the emphasis on teaching and scholarship that attempts to create a more humane and just world. Jesuit education has often done an outstanding job at closely examining significant problems in society (e.g., poverty, discrimination, injustice, unethical behavior) and has tried to create teaching, research, service, and learning environments to better develop possible solutions to important real world problems. I am pleased and proud to be part of the Jesuit and Catholic higher education system that values, nurtures, and highlights efforts to make the world a better place using the wisdom of our religious tradition and the gospels to help solve real problems for real people.

During the past several years, the American Catholic Church has suffered an enormous earthquake due to the child sexual abuse crisis that was initially reported on January 6, 2002 by the Boston Globe Spotlight Team. Although the sexual abuse of children by priests had been in the news many times before, the recent case in Boston resulted in perhaps the largest earthquake ever in the American Catholic Church. While the epicenter of the quake was centered in Boston, there were many significant after-shocks felt across the land. Sadly, Jesuits and Jesuit universities were not immune from the recent horrific news of clergy sexual misconduct. A number of Jesuits experienced credible accusations of child sexual abuse. One of the Jesuit university presidents resigned after allegations of sexual misconduct surfaced. Sadly, we have been reminded that some priests and bishops (and even some Jesuits) can behave badly in ways that significantly harm others.

While Jesuit education has a long and proud tradition of turning their teaching, research, and service efforts towards the marginalized of society and social justice concerns off campus, this time we have been in a situation that focused our efforts on our Roman Catholic institution and even towards our own Jesuit colleagues. This time, the American Catholic Church (including the Jesuit family) was in deep trouble. This time, the best that Jesuit education can offer was needed to help the Church in crisis.

As everyone knows, the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church has received enormous publicity during the past few years. Furthermore, numerous people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse agendas have
offered ideas about what caused the problem of clergy sexual abuse and what should be done to solve it. Holy debates issues in the Roman Catholic Church such as the ordination of women, homosexuals, and married persons were also thrown into the discussion with many trying to make connections between these issues and the recent clerical sexual abuse crisis. There has been a great deal of finger pointing, hysteria, anger, and strong opinions expressed both in and outside of the Catholic family. However, there has been too little thoughtful, reasoned, and data driven discussion that is so sorely needed. This is where Jesuit education can and should step up to the plate and help.

A number of Jesuit universities and particular faculty and staff at these institutions have indeed stepped up to the plate to offer careful, thoughtful, and reasoned reflections on the clergy sexual abuse problem and as well as contribute potential solutions. Several universities (e.g., Boston College, Santa Clara University) have held national and international conferences on the topic with some of the best minds and experts in the world involved. While I cannot articulate the details of what the other 27 Jesuit colleges and universities have contributed to this crisis, I can speak to the efforts of one Jesuit university. Although 5,000 miles from the Boston epicenter, Santa Clara has been on the national and international stage trying to offer help to a Church in crisis.

During the fall of 1998 (long before the January 2002 headlines appeared in the Boston Globe), Santa Clara hosted an international conference on the topic of Catholic clergy sexual abuse with leading mental health professionals who specialize in this area from the United States and Canada. The conference resulted in an edited scholarly book entitled, Bless me father for I have sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests (Greenwood Press, 1999). Two additional and more multidisciplinary conferences were held during the spring of both 2003 and 2004 resulting in another edited scholarly book entitled, Sin against the Innocents: Sexual Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church (Greenwood Press, 2004).

In a series of books, professional and lay articles, op-ed pieces, and countless media interviews, we at Santa Clara have tried to offer the best available data on the clergy abuse situation. What does some of this information tell us?

The data from a variety of reliable sources including the recently released John Jay College report suggest that approximately 4 percent of Catholic priests have had a sexual encounter with a minor with the majority of victims being teenage boys who were fodder. Since there have been approximately 150,000 priests (and brothers) in the United States over the past 50 years and since research suggests that the average number of victims per clergy offender is close to three, we should expect about 6,000 sex offending priests or brothers during the past 50 years with a total of about 16,000 victims. This estimate includes both the diocesan priests reported by the John Jay study as well as what we would predict from the religious orders and elsewhere.

As awful as these numbers are, it appears that this 4 percent figure also applies to male clergy from other religious traditions (as well as men who have regular unsupervised access to and power over children such as teachers, scout leaders, and coaches).
in fact victims of child sexual abuse. Most perpetuated their first sexual violation about a year after ordination and thus it makes it difficult to screen out sex offenders from seminary applications when they have unlikely committed any of these offenses prior to or during their application and formation process. The vast majority of sex offending priests experience co-morbidity or several physical or psychiatric diagnoses at once. These typically include alcoholism and other substance abuse problems, brain injury, and personality, impulse control, or affective disorders.

Although the sexual victimization of minors by priests and by the general population of men has been documented for centuries, there appears to be a “cohort effect” such that priests who were ordained around 1970 have been at much higher risk than those of previous and subsequent generations. Curiously, the majority of the case reports that we read about in the newspapers occurred during the 1960’s and 1970’s. Why might this be?

There are several possible reasons. Unlike today, many of these men entered seminary when they were young. They were less likely to work through the complex sexual development and expression issues that laypersons can address. These issues were not adequately evaluated before entering seminary or dealt with once in formation. Frankly, most priests trained in that time report that if they expressed concerns about sexual matters they were generally told to “take a cold shower, work harder, pray about it.”

These men also entered religious life around both Vatican II and during the sexual revolution in the United States and elsewhere. Furthermore, many seminaries and priests were fleeing religious life during this time. In fact, 1973 was the peak year of priests and seminarians leaving their vocation. This time period was a major turning point in the history of the American Catholic Church and in the United States in general. Traditional boundaries and rules were broken over night. All of a sudden, up was down and down was up. Other groups were affected as well. For example, research suggests that about 25 percent of male psychotherapists were sexually involved with at least one of their patients during these years. This figure is closer to 2 percent today. A confluence of factors emerged during the 1960’s and 1970’s in Church and American history that likely created an environment that placed these young priests and seminarians at higher risk for potential sexual misconduct.
So, what can be done about the deep sexual abuse crisis at the Catholic Church? This complex question cannot be answered in this brief article. There are many reasonable and knowledgeable people who have offered useful and insightful strategies. We can also learn from other religious and secular groups who have struggled with this problem and have developed useful policies and procedures. The multidisciplinary professionals who have participated in the three conferences held at Santa Clara University between 1998 and 2004 collectively offer the following nine principles that have been elaborated upon in much more detail in the edited books referred to above.

1. Do everything possible to protect children and families from abuse and victimization of any kind by clergy.
2. The Church and religious superiors must be held responsible and accountable for their decisions especially when adequate guidance was available to them.
3. Attorneys and insurance companies can only help so much with this crisis and cannot dictate the manner in which the Church and its leaders respond.
4. The Church should not forget its spiritual and moral tradition and must allow the model of Jesus and the wisdom of the gospels to guide all behavior.
5. Zero tolerance has some appeal although must be considered carefully since it is not necessarily best protect children and families from abusive clergy.
6. Universality and clarity is needed in policies and procedures for all Church jurisdictions.
7. Research is needed to better understand the clergy sexual abuse problem in order to find ways to eliminate it in the future. Collaborative and cooperative research is strongly encouraged.
8. Keep the light on the problem so that what was once in the dark is no longer.
9. Follow the example of Jesus at all times.

Curiously, my major area of research has been laboratory work on the psychological benefits of aerobic exercise. This topic, of course, has absolutely nothing to do with sex offending clergy. However, as a licensed psychologist in clinical practice, an active practicing Catholic, and a psychology professor at a Jesuit university, one thing after another lead me to be invited to evaluate, treat, and consult with priests accused of sexual misconduct as well as their victims during the past 15 years. Once the story of sexual offending priests in the Catholic Church broke during January of 2002, one thing again led to another to find myself more and more involved with this topic in research, teaching, consulting, and clinical practice. While I certainly continue to do laboratory research on aerobic exercise, I find myself being called upon to bring my skills to bear on this current crisis in the American Catholic Church.

I see my involvement and the support of Santa Clara University as very much part of what Jesuit education is all about. Using the skills that we have in research, scholarship, teaching, and service together to create a more humane, just, and ethical world that ultimately glorifies God and helps build the Kingdom is what Jesuit education must aspire to. Furthermore, this time around, there is a call to help our brothers and sisters in Christ. I would hope that all of the Jesuits colleges and universities and those who have various skills and talents in numerous disciplines and fields would together join me and Santa Clara in helping our Church in crisis. To do otherwise would fail to take the values and ideals of Jesuit education seriously.

"And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)