

THE SURVIVAL OF THE SPIRIT  
WHILE MIRED IN THE TOXIC WASTES OF THE  
ECCLESIASTICAL SWAMP

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## Preface

Sexual abuse of children and minors by trusted clergy results is a unique type of trauma. The vast majority of victims are devoted members of their denominations with an exceptional degree of trust in their clergy person and in the religious system. The intensity and destructive effects of the trauma associated with clergy abuse are directly related to the emotional bond between the victim and the abuser. This bond is grounded in factors that are described as “spiritual” but which in fact are toxic and lead to a traumatic relationship that is accompanied by sexual abuse.

There are two dimensions of religious based trauma that directly impact the overall effects of clergy sexual abuse: the emotional and mental conditioning of the victim, which directly influences susceptibility to abuse and, the same conditioning with the added element of a toxic spirituality which shapes the impact of abuse on the victim.

Prevention of the lasting effects of trauma from clergy sexual abuse involves more than awareness of the modus operandi of sexual predators in clergy clothing. It must also take into account the enabling aspect of religious conditioning that leads to a post-abuse feeling of alienation from God as well as society. Short term prevention is directed at potential victims but also at the religious systems or institutions that both train and employ clergy. Long term prevention probes deeply into the systemic factors that enable clergy sexual abuse and produce the unique traumatic effects of this abuse on the believing victims.

I have been a Catholic all my life. I was ordained a priest in 1970 and at that time and for many years thereafter I accepted without question the doctrine and law of the Catholic Church in every way. I believed in the particular teachings about the pope, bishops and priests. I believed that the Church was a response to a personal God who knew what I did at all times, responded to my prayers, was deeply concerned about human behavior and was displeased by sin and sinners. This God invoked both love and fear and gave us the security of communicating his will for us through the special medium of his popes and bishops.

I believed that all of the robes, rituals, customs, rules and traditions had an essential place in God’s special community on earth. I believed that priests and bishops really were “different” and possessed special powers given them by God through ordination. I firmly believed that this was the only way to God and the only true Church.

Those who have been sexually assaulted by Catholic clergy or religious have experienced spiritual trauma as well as emotional and psychological trauma. The impact on the soul is often subtle and grows more painful and debilitating as time passes. Many survivors have said that this spiritual pain has been worse than the emotional pain. To be sure, the assault on the spirit is not limited to the actual victims but to the many others who are caught up in the collateral damage. Parents, spouses and siblings are the most obvious but it spreads to others who know, love or care for the victims. The spiritual damage has been experienced by attorneys, counselors,

media persons and law enforcement professionals who become involved with clergy abuse victims. What they have seen and heard is a severe jolt to the spiritual or religious belief system.

My remarks are based on twenty-four years of experience of direct communication with victims of clergy sexual abuse. During these years I have also come to know the parents and family members of victims and have had their pain seared into my soul. Finally, I draw on my own experience of along, challenging and often painful struggle for spiritual survival.

### ***THE SURVIVAL OF THE SPIRIT***

Most of the published literature on clergy abuse of children has addressed the emotional and psychological effects of sexual abuse common to all victims. The literature published by Church-related sources has consistently addressed the impact of clergy abuse on the Church as an institution as well as the problems and treatment needs of the clergy abusers. The institutional Catholic Church has done almost nothing in terms of studying the immediate and long term effects of abuse on the victims nor has it made any organized efforts at responding to their unique pastoral needs.<sup>1</sup>

Sexual abuse of Catholic children and adolescents by Catholic clergy is especially traumatic because of the devastating effect on the victim's spirituality and religiosity.<sup>2</sup> The spiritual trauma suffered by victims is complex and certainly not limited to unwillingness to participate in religious liturgical services. The institutional Church is unable to gauge spirituality in terms other than attendance at devotional events, liturgical services, amount of donations or docile acceptance of Church teachings and authority.

#### *Catholic Clergy Sexual Abuse: The Socio-Historical Context*

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<sup>1</sup> The Vatican sponsored a symposium on April 2-5, 2003 on Sexual Abuse of Children. The promised volume of talks and discussions never appeared and no evidence of the symposium is available except from scattered news accounts published at the time. The US Bishops supported a Think Tank in St. Louis, February, 1993 which covered the institutional response but there was little discussion about the special effects on victims.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara McLaughlin, "Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor's Relationship with God and the Church." Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity 1(1994): p. 145.

Sexual abuse of children and other vulnerable persons by Catholic clerics has been a significant though shameful aspect of Catholic clerical culture for centuries. The revelations that began in the United States in 1984 and reached a crescendo with the Boston Globe expose in 2002 did not portray a new reality. Rather, they uncovered what had existed below the surface for centuries.

The darkest aspect of mandatory celibacy has been the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, adolescents and vulnerable adult men and women. The earliest officially documented example of the Church's awareness of such abuse is found in the canons of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Synod of Elvira. Here we find the first of a series of legislative and disciplinary laws or regulations issued by Church sources in response to violations of celibacy. Although there is ample evidence that clerics engaged in sex with women and young girls, most of the legislation was directed at those who sexually abused young boys.

Church authorities did not ignore sexual abuse throughout the centuries. On the contrary there has been a steady stream of edicts, interventions and admonitions dating from the early 4<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Church legislation forbade any sexual contact between clerics and minors and in several instances it imposed or urged substantial penalties for offenders.<sup>3</sup> When Church legislation was codified for the first time in 1917 a canon was inserted which made sexual contact between a cleric and a minor of either sex a crime.<sup>4</sup> The prescribed penalties include dismissal or defrocking as it is commonly called.

The contemporary scandal has focused on two aspects of clergy sexual abuse: the actual deviant sexual acts perpetrated by dysfunctional clerics and, the extensive policy of cover-up engaged in by the Church office-holders. The present-day criticism of the hierarchy for their disastrous response to the abuse scandal is unique. There is scant evidence from previous centuries that points to an awareness that superiors who enabled abusive clerics themselves shared in the guilt of the crime. Peter Damian spoke out against superiors who looked the other way<sup>5</sup> and two Church councils, the IV Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Basle (1449) imposed penalties on superiors who tolerated clerics who violated their celibate promises.<sup>6</sup>

The official voice of the Catholic Church has consistently framed clergy sexual abuse as a moral/volitional issue in keeping with its fundamental teaching on human sexuality. Recent popes have referred to abusive clerics as sinners and abuse as sin. This approach has had a profound influence on the response to the offending clerics and to their victims as well. In keeping with the Catholic theology of penance and forgiveness, the clergy abuser is encouraged

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<sup>3</sup> See Peter Damian, The Book of Gomorrah, Translation by Pierre Payer (Ottawa, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1982), p. 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> Canon 2359, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Damian, p. 30. Damian refers to the "*impious piety*" of superiors who fail to take action against sexually abusing clerics.

<sup>6</sup> IV Lateran Council, canon 14 in H.J. Schroeder, editor, Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils (St. Louis, B. Herder, 1937), p. 256 and p. 473-474.

to acknowledge his sinful actions, seek God's forgiveness and sin no more. Victims are encouraged to forgive those who have abused them. This unrealistic emphasis is not on the abuse and its powerfully destructive effects on the victim, but on a future wherein the sexual abuse is not a cause for embarrassment for the institutional Church. The fallacy of considering clergy abuse only in terms of sin is that it serves as an excuse to overlook the criminality of the act. It also serves as a distraction from the need for accountability on the part of the abuser as well as the ecclesiastical system that formed, enabled and in the end, covered for the abusive cleric.

By failing to look beyond the moral/volitional dimensions of sexual abuse, Church leadership has failed to comprehend the complex and often subtle effects of sexual abuse on the victims.<sup>7</sup> In the recent past it has not been uncommon for Churchmen to urge victims to "put it behind you and move on with your life." This attitude is as unrealistic and naive as expecting a compulsive pedophile or ephebophile to "repent and sin no more." Catholic bishops in general have scant awareness of the nature of sexual dysfunction and even less awareness of the damaging effects of abuse on victims. Prior to 1984 there is no evidence that bishops' groups ever sponsored any training or education in the effects of abuse. Between 1985 and 2002 there were several workshops and seminars given around the U.S. on clergy sex abuse. In most of these a psychologist or psychiatrist was a featured speaker; however they limited their presentations to the pathology of the abusers. Presentations sponsored by official Church sources on the welfare of the victims have been extremely rare.

Historically there is little documentation about the manner with which Church officials responded to victims if they responded at all. One study from 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy describes how a young adolescent victim of a cleric was punished for his participation in the illicit sexual acts, but the punishment was minimized because he had been an unwilling participant.<sup>8</sup> The premise was that all sexual activity outside of marriage was seriously sinful and participation in any sexual activity involved at least some degree of volitional assent. Other than looking at the effects on victims from a strictly moral perspective there is little historical evidence of any awareness of or concern for the emotional or spiritual impact of abuse by a clergyman. This lack of attention to the needs of victims has carried over to the contemporary scene as well. To date there have been no initiatives sponsored by any official Catholic Church body from the Vatican down to the diocesan level to explore the impact of abuse on victims and to find ways to provide effective assistance and healing.

Catholic clerics are obliged to total sexual abstinence as a result of mandatory celibacy. The only exceptions are Eastern rite priests and the very small number of Episcopal priests who

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kramer, "Church needs study of human sexuality," National Catholic Reporter, November 1, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> R. Sheer, "A canon, a choirboy and homosexuality in late sixteenth century Italy: a case study," Journal of Homosexuality 21(1991): 1-22.

have embraced Catholicism. Celibacy further enhances the public perception of priests as men set apart. This perception is grounded in official Church teaching about the nature and role of the priesthood and the bishopric. The Church is based on a socio-cultural model of a stratified society with a monarchical system of government.<sup>9</sup> The leadership is restricted to those in holy orders who are ordained to provide spiritual nourishment and guidance for lay people who constitute the vast majority of the Church. The common belief is that once a man is ordained an ontological change takes place and he is fundamentally different from lay people.<sup>10</sup> His soul is different because he is, in the words of the late Pope John Paul II, “configured to Christ.” This common perception of who priests are and the power they possess is a distinguishing factor in the unique nature of the traumatic effects of sexual abuse by clerics.

### *How the Institutional Church has responded to clergy abuse victims*

The response of Church officials to sexual abuse victims and to the public is an important factor in understanding the traumatic effects unique to clergy abuse victims. Since nearly all victims were devout, practicing Catholics when they were abused, those who disclosed their abuse and sought help generally approached Church authorities. They usually did so with unquestioning confidence that they would be believed and helped. The pattern of response has been shown to have been quite the opposite which often further traumatized the victims.

Prior to the publicity surrounding the case of Gilbert Gauthe in Lafayette LA in 1984-85, the victims generally suffered in silence, either unable or unwilling to disclose to anyone including parents and close friends. When bishops learned of accusations the cleric in question was generally transferred in secrecy and placed in another assignment where the abuse often continued. In a minority of cases the clerics were sent to special Church sponsored institutions for treatment.<sup>11</sup> If Church officials contacted the victims it was usually to obtain their silence and not to provide pastoral care. Even today in spite of the massive publicity surrounding clergy abuse, most bishops have never spoken with a victim.

The immense power of the institutional Catholic Church prevailed until the mid-1980's after which time the Churches learned that they could not always depend on cooperation and support from sympathetic judicial and law enforcement officials as well as the secular media. Prior to this period the pattern and practice of the Catholic hierarchy worldwide had been to

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<sup>9</sup> See Pope Pius X, Encyclical *Vehementer nos*, Feb. 11, 1906: “*This Church is in essence an unequal society, that is to say a society comprising two categories of persons, the shepherds and the flock.*” [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_x/encyclicals/documents/](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/)

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Dubuque, Brown-Roa, 1994), nn. 1546-1549, p. 386-387.

<sup>11</sup> These include the institutions sponsored and staffed by the Servants of the Paraclete which was founded in 1947, Southdown in Toronto (1965), St. John Vianney, Downingtown PA, 1946 and St. Luke Institute, 1978.

cover-up, deny and minimize, with no apparent awareness of the deeply traumatic effects on victims and the collateral effects on their families. The media attention, civil court cases and public outrage that began in 1984 and reached a crescendo in 2002 forced the institutional Church to face the reality of clergy abuse and it also focused long overdue attention on the plight of the victims.

### *The Unique Nature of Clergy Abuse Trauma - Victims twice betrayed*

Catholic victims are twice betrayed. The perpetrating cleric betrays the trust placed in him and the institutional Church prepares victims for their spiritual trauma by its teaching about the nature of the priesthood. When many clergy victims began to look at the effects of the abuse on their lives it became obvious that there was something different about the impact on a believing Church member when raped or assaulted by a clergyman or religious woman. Not only did the rape or assault have disastrous physical, emotional and psychological effects but it was spiritually damaging as well.

Most victims are pre-conditioned for this unique trauma by their experience and education in the institutional Church. With very rare exceptions they have been devout believers with unquestioning loyalty to their Church. This loyalty extends to every level, from the local parish to the Vatican. It is a blind loyalty because these men and women are taught throughout their religious training that they *must* accept and believe whatever the “Church” says or teaches without question. This philosophy of compliance has been imposed in such a way that “believers” generally are not able to distinguish between a foundational doctrinal statement and a casual utterance by a clergyman. They have been taught that to doubt or question a cleric is to offend God and thus commit a sin.

Religion is about a relationship between human beings and an unseen power. No matter how much humans claim to know about the identity and actions of this power, it is still a vast unknown. Consequently it is not unusual that religions produce a significant amount of internal mythology to justify their existence. This in turn leads to magical thinking on the part of congregants. The mythology about ordained ministers shapes the pre-existing beliefs and the related magical thinking serves as a powerful enabling factor in clergy sexual abuse. The “faithful” are expected to believe that the clergy have a special “inside” communication with the divine. The higher in rank the more influence he has with God. When popes, bishops or ordinary priests make pronouncements about the nature of God or provide interpretations of God’s will, Catholics are expected to believe without question when in fact the pope’s insight into the true nature of God is no more accurate than that of a homeless drug addict since neither is presumed to have had a personal one-on-one with the Higher Power. Yet the titles and pretensions of the Catholic hierarchy are firmly embedded in the emotions of the “faithful” and remind them of their inferior position. The clergyman’s power over a youthful victim is already established since he is an adult but this power is greatly enhanced because of his priesthood. The toxic effects of the abuse thus spread to the very soul of the person.

### *The Source of the Trauma - What Causes the Pain*

The act of sexual abuse itself is the most obvious source of physical and emotional pain. Although the official Church often uses euphemistic and minimizing language to refer to abuse, such as “boundary violations,” or “inappropriate touches,” in reality the sexual abuse is no different or less vicious than that inflicted by any other perpetrator. Church officials also claim that in most cases there is only one instance of abuse, a myth that has repeatedly been exploded by evidence obtained in the many court cases.

Church officials and even devout parents have, in many cases, refused to believe victims who disclosed their abuse. Such a reaction is the source of unique pain and continued re-victimization. One must never forget that most child or adolescent victims were born into devout families. The foundation for the victims’ belief system is put in place by the parents who themselves are usually unwilling or incapable of questioning anything about their religion or the deportment and practices of the clergy. Parents often play the role of enablers without intending to do so. When a child tries to reveal sexual abuse by a cleric some parents have refused to believe it or have even punished the child for making the accusation. Even in those cases where the parents reluctantly believed the child, the common tendency was to remain silent out of fear or exaggerated deference to the Church. When this happens the victim sees the parent as complicit with the Church and ends up feeling hopelessly trapped in the traumatic cocoon of fear, guilt and shame.

The response of the official Church has itself been a source of severe trauma. There is scant evidence that bishops or other clerics including parish pastors, proactively set out to provide sympathetic pastoral care to victims and their families. On the contrary the common response has been negative and toxic. Victims have been told that they were mistaken about what happened to them or they were provided with thin excuses that minimized the cleric’s actions and dismissed the victim’s experience. In many instances they have been enjoined to remain silent and to avoid speaking to law enforcement agencies or the media. Church officials have utilized everything from gentle persuasion (“you wouldn’t want to hurt the Church would you?”) to threats of excommunication. Some accused clerics have counter-sued their victims while others have publicly derided them. Victims’ attorneys have been slandered from the pulpit and parishioners have been mobilized against parents who have broken the code of silence. In an ironic twist the victims of the clergy have often been portrayed as enemies of the Church, unwilling to forgive and motivated by revenge to hurt the Church.<sup>12</sup>

The abused and their families tend to identify the perpetrating cleric and his supportive superiors with “*the Church.*” Such a mistaken notion is supported by official doctrine of the Church as a stratified society with the laity in a subordinate and far less important role than the

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<sup>12</sup> Jason Berry, Lead Us Not Into Temptation (New York, Doubleday, 1992), p. 325.

clergy. When a Catholic child or adult is sexually assaulted or raped by a cleric, he or she usually views the cleric himself as the one who inflicted the harm. When bishops or other officials either fail to respond in a compassionate manner and appear to support the offender at the expense of the victim, it is the *Church* that is inflicting the harm. This is a particularly painful impression because Catholics are taught that the Church is God's kingdom or community on earth. Thus the sexual abuse and the official response cause a cognitive dissonance that has a traumatic impact on the person's spiritual core and fundamental belief system.

Catholics and indeed most Church-going people are taught to turn to their religious ministers in times of trouble. This potential source of support and healing is not usually available to clergy abuse victims because the institution has shown itself to be much more supportive of the offending clerics than their victims. The religious leaders identify their own security and personal goals with those of the institution. Thus the threat posed by those harmed by clerics is a danger to the leaders and therefore to the institution. Hence the response to victims is defensive and protective of the Church's image and security. Victims have been regularly told to remain silent "for the good of the Church." The Church they have been taught would help them has in fact, rejected them and this in turn causes a strong emotional reaction and deep spiritual confusion.

#### *Conditioning for Abuse - Survivor/Victim Beliefs that Become Toxic*

The spiritual trauma associated with clergy abuse is directly related to the belief system of the victims which is usually a mixture of authentic doctrine and irrational beliefs that are planted and nourished by the Church itself. The irrational beliefs are a combination of myth and magical thinking.

The foundational issue is the belief about the very nature of God. Traditional Christian religious systems have portrayed God as a theistic being with omniscience and complete power. Exaggerated human emotions such as anger, happiness, tenderness and concern are projected to this Supreme Being. Christians are taught that God punishes transgressions and rewards good behavior. A "sin" is an action, thought or omission that is offensive to God. Since God is believed to be just, "he" punishes sins. This is where mythology sets in. There is a common belief that God punishes sins not only in the afterlife but in this life, primarily through health problems or mishaps that result in some degree of suffering. It is not uncommon to hear Catholics and other Christians interpret physical defects, illness or accidents as God's revenge for some supposedly sinful act. The clergy have an inside communication channel to God. God prefers the clergy and especially the bishops and is highly pleased with the laity's obedience to his special chosen ones....or so the common mythology goes.

The traditional doctrine of "original sin" adds another layer of irrational belief about the Supreme Being and the individual's standing in the eyes of this being. Original sin is commonly believed to be inherited from the first human beings, Adam and Eve. Theologians have studied

and written much about original sin. The basic idea is captured in the official Catechism of the Catholic Church:

*As a result of original sin human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death; and inclined to sin. This inclination is called concupiscence.*<sup>13</sup>

The premise of original sin leads to the belief that people are basically sinful and prone to evil and therefore must *earn* God's love. Such thinking is especially powerful when it is imposed on children. Securing this love is a risky endeavor since humans are so prone to sin from an almost infinite variety of sources. Traditionally the Catholic Church's teaching on human sexuality has held that all sex outside of marriage is gravely or *mortally* sinful. This means that any sexual act, thought or desire with oneself or another is so heinous that to die with the sin unabsolved meant eternity in hell. Catholics are taught that their safety net is absolution by the priest through the sacrament of penance, or *confession* as it is commonly known. This belief leads to feelings of helplessness and rejection. It also fortifies the toxic dependence upon the priest.

Though such a belief in God as a super-being perpetually angry, especially over sexual matters, runs contrary to the teachings of Christ in the gospels, it is nevertheless dominant in Church teaching and in the image of God commonly held by victims and non-victims alike.

The next belief that we must examine is that which defines the nature of the Church. Catholic teaching holds that the institutional Catholic Church was founded by God and intended by Him from all eternity.<sup>14</sup> Devout Catholics believe that the visible Church, because it was instituted by Jesus Christ to save sinful people, is essential for their spiritual welfare. They are taught that the hierarchical governmental structure of the Church was not an option decided upon by the Church's earliest members, but directly instituted by God.<sup>15</sup> Most clergy abuse victims are devout, practicing and docile Catholics. When taught that the institutional Church is the kingdom of God on earth and the only source for interpreting the Divine Will<sup>16</sup> they believe it. When taught that the bishops were chosen by God to govern His kingdom, they believe it. When taught that an offense against the institutional Church or one of its consecrated leaders is an offense against God, they believe it.

The Church and its clerics are presented as far superior to lay persons and especially to children. The Church is not only an immense behemoth standing before the intimidated and

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<sup>13</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (Dubuque, Iowa, Brown-Roa, 1994), par. 418, p. 102. The official version of the Catechism was published by Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1994 and was officially promulgated by Pope John Paul II on October 11, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, par. 759, p. 199.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. par. 861-862, pp. 228-229.

<sup>16</sup> Cf The Church in the Modern World, par 50.

fear-filled victim, but it is *perfect* and therefore not capable of inflicting suffering or of committing wrong-doing. This is a core aspect of the erroneous and toxic belief held by countless men and women. They often turn the guilt back on themselves asking themselves “*what have I done wrong to be punished like this?*” Though the actual sexual abuse may have happened in childhood or adolescence, the toxic beliefs not only remain into adulthood but become more painful as time passes.

The doctrine of forgiveness forms the basis for yet another belief that becomes toxic when merged with the Church’s response to sexual abuse. Most people misunderstand the theological concept and believe it means leaving the offense behind and essentially forgetting about it while forgoing any expectation of justice or punishment for the offender. How often have victims cringed at the words arrogantly uttered by a bishop or high ranking cleric that “*we are a forgiving Church?*” This attitude imposes misplaced guilt on the victims for their justifiably angry feelings against their perpetrators.

There is a degree of confusion about the meaning of forgiveness. When Church officials speak of it and ask victims to dutifully forgive their abusers, this easily translates into re-victimization. It is a conscious attempt to misuse a theological concept to avoid responsibility and accountability for the crime of abuse. To the victim, forgiveness may translate to acting and thinking as if the event did not happen and to the offender it translates into deliverance from taking responsibility for the abuse.

Victims are often reminded that forgiveness is at the core of the Christian belief system. They easily confuse the authentic notion of forgiveness with the *feeling* of forgiveness and the consequence that all is forgiven and forgotten. Yet most, perhaps all cannot feel any benevolence toward a sexual abuser. The feeling of anger simply cannot be controlled or willed away in the name of a misunderstood and certainly misused religious doctrine. Churchmen or others who urge forgiveness intentionally misinterpret the doctrine of forgiveness for their own selfish benefit. They also do not comprehend the depth of pain that comes from sexual abuse nor do they understand what re-victimization means.<sup>17</sup>

Beliefs about forgiveness quickly become toxic for the victim and for the institution as well. The victim experiences intense guilt over not being able to *feel* a sense of forgiveness. The institutional Church hinders its own painful growth toward pastoral authenticity by using forgiveness to push the whole issue into the shadows. Margaret Kennedy summed it up well: “*Churches use the concept of forgiveness to short circuit the survival empowerment process...The Church cannot bear to hear about child sexual abuse, so the quicker a child forgives, the easier it is for the listener.*”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Margaret Kennedy, “Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse - The Survivors’ Voice Leading to Change,” Child Abuse Review 9(2000): p. 132-133.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 133.

Bishop Geoff Robinson provides a lucid and realistic description of forgiveness in the context of clergy sexual abuse in his book Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church.<sup>19</sup> He correctly points out that authentic forgiveness can benefit the victim if he or she arrives at the point of shedding the emotional control the abuser had over him or her even years after the actual tragic event took place. True forgiveness is happening when the victim moves beyond the place where the sexual assault dominates feelings and emotions and continuously disturbs the ability to love and be at peace. It is happening when the victim controls his or her anger rather than being devoured and obsessed by it. At this point, the abuser himself and the enabling Church system have lost control over the victim.

Possibly the most toxic beliefs are those about the identity of the abuser. Sexual abuse perpetrated by a Catholic priest on a believing Catholic can be more devastating precisely because of the spiritual component. Priest abuse differs from incest or abuse by anyone else including religious ministers of other denominations precisely because of the beliefs about the nature of the priesthood.<sup>20</sup> In short, the priest is viewed not only as a representative of God, but *as God* by many victims. This belief is not based on free-floating Catholic mythology but is solidly grounded in Church teaching. Priests believe they are ontologically different because of their ordination. The language used by the official Church can easily lead a person to the belief that the priest is the closest thing to God on this earth. The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes this teaching when it says:

*In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his body...This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts "in persona Christi capitis" [in the person of Christ as head].*<sup>21</sup>

Pope Pius XII enunciated the traditional teaching even more directly in his encyclical *Mediator Dei* which was published in 1947:

*Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest [Jesus Christ] and possesses the authority to act in the power and person of Christ himself.*<sup>22</sup>

Lest one think that such presumptuous theology was replaced by more enlightened teaching after the Second Vatican Council, one need only look to the idea of the priesthood

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<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Robinson, Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church (Mulgrave, Victoria, Australia, 2007): pp. 220-225.

<sup>20</sup> Katherine DeGuilio, "Interview with Dr. Leslie Lothstein," National Catholic Reporter, August 9, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 1548, p. 387.

<sup>22</sup> Pius XII, "Mediator Dei," November 20, 1947 in Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 39(1947), p. 548.

propagated by Pope John Paul II. The priest, from the moment of ordination, is configured to Christ and thereby ontologically different from other men and women. Thus the pope continues the highly mystical notion that a priest's soul is different from that of other persons.<sup>23</sup> One does not need much reflection to see how such a strange theological doctrine, propagated by a popular pope, could lead to highly toxic beliefs by victims of the clergy.

No amount of theological distinction or subtle nuancing of the official texts can change the traditional impression of priests that is absorbed by Catholics from childhood. They see priests as unique beings, different from ordinary men, deserving of their respect, obedience and even awe. In Catholic culture the priest is in a far superior position to lay persons because of his vast, mysterious powers. The power a priest holds over lay people plus the erroneous mystique that he actually stands in the place of god sets a clergy victim up for severe emotional and spiritual trauma.

The concept of God, the nature of the Church and the identity of the priest mesh together to form a devastating source of trauma for abuse victims. They believe in a *theistic* God, that is, a God that is a "super person" with human emotions and reactions. This God actually does things in the lives of people. The Church is God's special enclave on earth and its clergy are his personal representatives complete with some of his powers. He shows himself through the priests and bishops. If a cleric is kind it is often seen as God's kindness manifested through him. If a priest is angry or somehow destructive to a person this is seen as a divine act, possibly to punish something the person did wrong. Far too many clergy abuse victims see their abuse as retribution or far worse, as a sexual assault by God. Barbara Blaine, founder and president of the oldest and largest victim support organization, SNAP<sup>24</sup> said in a 2002 interview, "*Many of us feel as if we had been raped by God.*"<sup>25</sup>

The power a priest has over his victims as well as the erroneous beliefs about the nature of the priesthood contribute to the creation of a toxic bond between victim and perpetrator, commonly known as a *trauma bond*.<sup>26</sup> The existence of this bond explains why victims tolerate repeated acts of abuse, why victims appear to be involved in an actual relationship with abusers, why they are fearful of disclosing their sexual abuse and why they experience persistent fear, shame and isolation. The trauma bond is especially strong when fortified by religion-based beliefs and fears. During the grooming process whereby the clergy-perpetrator develops the "relationship" with his victim, the victim often experiences feelings of "specialness" at receiving the coveted attentions of a priest. Once the actual sexual contact is initiated by the cleric a whole

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<sup>23</sup> See *Letter to Priests: Holy Thursday, 2004*.

<sup>24</sup> SNAP stands for Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Ungar, "Abuse's impact can be lifelong," in *Delaware News Journal*, 6-13-2002.

<sup>26</sup> The trauma bond concept was first explored by Dr. Donald Dutton, University of British Columbia. See also Patrick Carnes, *The Betrayal Bond* (Deerfield Beach FL, Health Communications, 1997) and especially Shirley Julich, "Stockholm Syndrome and Child Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 14(2005): 107-129.

new set of feelings develop including confusion, fear, shame and guilt. In spite of these conflicting feelings many clergy victims remain trapped because the trauma bond only grows stronger with the passage of time. In a very real sense this is incest. In her address to the U.S. Catholic bishops in June 2002, Dr. Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea explained it clearly:

*The sexual violation of a child or adolescent by a priest is incest. It is a sexual and relational transgression perpetrated by THE father of the child's extended family; a man in whom the child is taught from birth to trust above everyone else in his life, to trust second only to God. Priest abuse IS incest.*<sup>27</sup>

The pain and fear related to any form of sexual abuse is magnified when the perpetrator is a clergyman and even more so if he is a priest. Many victims report that their abusers threatened them with dire consequences if they disclosed. Some were told that the priest's abusive attentions were God's will and others that to disclose would harm the priest and the Church. Still others were led to believe that this secret was meant to be kept between them and disclosure would bring God's wrath to family or friends. Perhaps one of the more bizarre twists with clergy victims is the reversal of guilt. Believing the priest takes God's place many victims were convinced that priests can do no wrong and because of their celibacy, could not experience any sexual feeling much less sexual contact. The sexual assault by the cleric caused some victims to believe that they had led the priest to commit a sexual act and *they* assumed the guilt and responsibility for their own sexual transgression and that of the priest as well.

Children are especially prone to the paralyzing fear that follows sexual abuse because of their pre-existing beliefs about priests, the Church and God. The fear is compounded by deep confusion over the morality of the sexual actions and their feelings for the abuser.<sup>28</sup> Catholic children are taught that any sexual thought, desire or action is mortally sinful if it occurs outside of marriage. Furthermore they are taught that spiritual relief and reconciliation with God comes through the intervention of the priest to whom one confesses and receives absolution from the sin. If the priest is, in the mind of the victim, the cause of the sin, then the sole avenue for relief is cut off and the victim's sense of guilt and fear of divine punishment is compounded.

Many victims erroneously believe that any pleasurable feelings they may experience are sinful. They may not have intended these feelings and almost always fail to understand that they are involuntary and therefore beyond their control. Their sense of guilt and shame is often magnified if they assume the abuser's sinfulness. The Church's teaching on homosexuality is an additional source of trauma for the majority of youthful victims who are male. The traditional teaching has consistently framed homosexuality and same-sex relations as mortally sinful. The Catholic Catechism repeats the official position that homosexuality and homosexual acts as

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, "The Long Term Impact of Early Sexual Trauma." Paper presented to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 13, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Julich, p. 120.

intrinsically disordered and contrary to the natural law.<sup>29</sup> If a male or female victim sees himself or herself as heterosexual and experiences sexual abuse by a member of the same sex (priest or nun for example), the moral confusion and sense of isolation and shame is even more intense.

Traditional Catholic spirituality is commonly associated with self-denial, participation in liturgical rituals, dependence on the clergy and the prescriptive pronouncements of the Church for spiritual security. The pre-Christian Stoic dualism that heavily influenced the formation of the primitive Church's sexual ethic is still evident in the emphasis on self-denial and the exaltation of sexual abstinence.<sup>30</sup> Catholics believe that the sacraments are their primary source for spiritual security since the Church teaches that they are necessary for salvation.<sup>31</sup> They are dependent on the clergy for the sacraments since the clergy have the power to judge eligibility for them and are the actual ministers for all but one of the sacraments.<sup>32</sup> Thus Catholic spirituality is essentially a dependent spirituality. Lay persons occupy the passive role with clerics as the actors. Since a secure spirituality involves being both obedient to Church teachings and being as free from sin as possible, it is obvious how essential a role priests play. Catholics are not taught to take responsibility for their spiritual choices. They are told what to choose and that an opposite choice brings the opprobrium of the clergy and its consequent feelings of guilt.

Even in its official response to clergy sexual abuse, especially since the Boston revelations in 2002, the Church continues to show that it is blind to the revictimization this dependent spirituality has on the abused. There have been cases wherein Church officials, while trying to sound sympathetic to victims, have urged that they "go to confession" or urged that they return to active participation in the Church's rituals. Many of the victim oriented liturgies have actually acted as triggers for re-experiencing the trauma associated with the abuse. Even the suggestion of liturgies of penance or lamentation, in spite of the possibly good intentions of the Church officials, indicate the inability to comprehend the nature of the spiritual and emotional damage from clergy abuse. Liturgies performed primarily by clerics, though they express regret and sorrow, end up by giving the clerics the feeling that they have "done something" but have little long term healing effect on victims. The Church here confuses gesture or ritual with substantial healing. In reality the liturgies are symbolic and quickly forgotten, but they illustrate the continuing attempts by clerics to maintain control over the scandal they have caused.

### *The Symptoms of Spiritual Trauma*

Religious belief systems are constructed by human as they attempt to provide meaning to

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<sup>29</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2357, p. 566.

<sup>30</sup> See Eugene Kennedy, The Unhealed Wound (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 1129, p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> The ministers for marriage are the spouses themselves yet the Church insists on the presence of a cleric as the official witness.

life. They are a connecting pathway to the unseen powers that people have always believed had control over life. For primitive people the immense powers of nature were thought to be the actions of unseen gods. Throughout history certain human persons were singled out as being more favorable to the unseen supernatural powers and therefore were commissioned by the community to act as intermediaries between mortals and the gods. Catholicism, as a religious belief system, is no different than others. It teaches people that participation in the Church is essential not only for salvation in the next life but for the emotional security of finding God's favor in this life. Interaction between Church members and the clergy is an essential if not foundational aspect of life in the Church. Furthermore, Catholics are taught that the only way to spiritual salvation is through Jesus Christ and the proper place for encountering Christ is in the Catholic Church.<sup>33</sup> The pre-Vatican II doctrine that "Outside the Church there is no Salvation" is apparently alive and well though expressed in less offensive language.<sup>34</sup>

Spiritual trauma is real and not a hypothetical construct conjured up by supporters of abuse victims. Even Church leaders admit to it though perhaps they do not fully understand it. Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston is quoted in a 2004 article as saying:

*The priest was an icon of the transcendent, and hence the abuse had consequences that went beyond the damage caused by similar cases of abuse not involving clergy.*<sup>35</sup>

The same article quotes Rev. Robert Silva, former president of the National Federation of Priests' Councils:

*In Roman Catholicism it [the identification of the priest with God] has been sacrosanct...It has meant that the relationship of a priest to those persons with whom he interacts is perceived as most intimate, sacred and most trustworthy. It is in effect, for the individual to be in touch with what leads to God.*

The same article cites non-clergy sources such as psychologist Dr. David Finkelhor and psychologist-author Kenneth Pargament who agree that abuse by a cleric has a profoundly traumatic effect precisely because of its spiritual dimension.

*Attitude towards priests.* A primary symptom of spiritual trauma is the radical change in feelings towards priests. Some victims report serious confusion at first which is grounded in the

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<sup>33</sup> John Paul II, *Exhortation to the Church in Asia*, Nov. 6, 1999, nn. 8, 13, 14. [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_0611999\\_ecclesias-in-asia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_0611999_ecclesias-in-asia_en.html).

<sup>34</sup> See Michael Norwood, *From Sand to Solid Ground* (New York, Crossroad Publishing, 2007), p. 114-115 for a concise summary of the papal declaration *Dominus Jesus*, August 6, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Shirley Ragsdale, "Sexual abuse by clergy leaves greater damage, experts say," *Des Moines Register*, April 4, 2004.

deep respect and reverence for the priest which is now compromised by the feelings brought forth by the sexual abuse. The confusion is compounded when the victim believes he or she cannot be angry at the priest for fear of God's wrath or if the victim feels serious guilt arising from the sexual experience. As these feelings continue to develop they often turn to anger and loathing, not only with the abuser but with all priests. Seeing other clerics, especially if they are dressed in clerical garb or are performing services often acts as a painful reminder of the sexual abuse. Some see their perpetrator in every other cleric. Many also feel profoundly betrayed by priests in general because no other cleric stepped up to protect or support them.

Victims often exclaim that the sexual abuse robbed them of God. This response can have a number of meanings. The priest is intimately associated with God. For some, the estrangement from priests means estrangement from the Church and its sacraments which in turn means estrangement from God. Others believe that God has rejected them through the betrayal by the priest and still others report that they can no longer receive the sacraments because priests control the sacraments. To approach a priest for communion or any other sacrament would amount to re-visiting the pain and trauma.

Catholic victims have often been led along a religious developmental path that requires unquestioning trust in priests which in turn is equated with trust in God. To distrust a priest is to distrust God, or so many are taught. When a priest-abuser betrays that trust the victims can easily feel that God has betrayed their trust. They in turn often cannot feel trust in the clergy nor trust in God because their spirituality is such that the two are intertwined. Total loss of trust in the clergy is not permanently traumatic if one's spirituality is not dependent upon them yet for most Catholics the spiritual relationship with God is filtered through and consequently dependent on priests and bishops. Cut loose from priests, many victims erroneously believe they are consequently cut loose from God. The betrayal by the trusted priest is enmeshed with a sense of betrayal by the institutional Church, the guarantor of spiritual/religious security as well as a betrayal by the sacraments, personified in the priest.

An essential element in the Catholic Church's sacramental system and education mission is the core belief in the sacred and unique nature of the priest. It understates the issue to simply say that a devout Catholic believes this. It is perhaps more accurate to say that a believing Catholic's perception of the priest on all levels - emotional, cognitive and spiritual - is that of a being in whose essence God resides in a special, powerful way. When a priest sexually violates a minor or an adult the shock to the victim's spiritual and emotional system is beyond adequate description. Most often the victim cannot process the fact that the priest, the embodiment of Christ, has sexually violated him or her. The complex trauma begins with the sexual violation itself and extends to the shock from the deep sense of betrayal not just by a trusted person but by the God personified by that person.

*Attitudes toward and about the Church.* For many people the Church is identified with clerics, rituals and the comfort and security of familiar Church buildings. They often cannot distinguish between the Church as a socio-political institution and the Church as a spiritual

community. Though some abuse victims have been able to distinguish between the man who abused them and the wider Church, many cannot. Some experience an unexplained emptiness because they are emotionally and spiritually unable to participate in the sacramental liturgies and other familiar rituals. This is no small issue because the major life events are all commemorated in the Church's sacramental ceremonies. The emptiness the victims feel is the void left from spiritual loss. This pain is especially acute when connected to the more emotion-laden life events such as baptism, marriage and death. Many victims have experienced intense spiritual pain at not being able to attend the funerals of loved ones or not being able to have children baptized.

Catholics are surrounded by the symbols of their belief in God and in God's presence in their lives through the medium of the visible Church. The ritual of the sacraments, the liturgical vestments worn by clerics, the statues, rosaries and stained glass windows.....all are symbols that remind the believer of the presence of God in the Church and thereby in his or her life. Sexual abuse destroys the trust in the Church's representatives and it fragments the symbols of belief. Bishop Geoff Robinson sums it up thus:

*The power that has been abused is a spiritual power that allows a person to enter deeply into the secret lives of others. The link between the minister and the god can be impossible to break and it can easily seem as though the very god is the abuser. The abuse shatters the power of the symbols of that belief, e.g., the picture of a priest holding a host aloft becomes a mockery. The search for perfect love within that system of belief can become impossible.<sup>36</sup>*

The official Church's response to reports of clergy abuse and to the victims is pivotal to their spiritual balance. Many cannot simply separate their relationship with the abuser from their relationship with the Church and with God. The abuser is in a far more powerful and essential position in the Church than the abuser. When the Church's leadership appears to support the abuser the victim experiences further rejection and isolation. The most trusted source of comfort in times of trouble, confusion or threat has been the Church for many victims and now that source is turned against them.

It has been the norm and not the exception for clergy victims to turn to the civil courts for credibility and justice. Victims initially took this route as a last resort when they could no longer tolerate the frustration of dealing with the twisted and manipulative response they received from Church authorities. Although there have been exceptions the experience of most victims has been that of an uncaring, unresponsive and dishonest institutional Church. Again, the deep-seated sense of rejection by God had been communicated to victims by the Church's response. This sense of rejection is made even worse when segments of the lay community turn against victims or their family members.

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<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Robinson, op. cit., p. 218.

Although the duplicitous response of a lay community is the proper subject for a whole other study a brief consideration is important for it is an essential element in the victims' spiritual trauma. When victims or their families have "gone public" and engaged the Church in an embarrassing legal battle, the common response is defensiveness and denial.<sup>37</sup> Going public with a report of sexual abuse by a priest, especially a highly regarded priest often brings a strong backlash from the community. Victims are naturally bewildered and shocked that lay people, especially parents, would support a man who has sexually assaulted vulnerable children or adolescents. The disclosure rocks the belief system of many in the community because it threatens the symbols that give them spiritual security. They refuse to believe that a priest has committed such a heinous act because they *cannot* believe it. There is often a defensive reaction whereby the abuse victim is treated as a criminal. His or her crime is not so much in accusing the sacred person of a priest, but in threatening the security of the dependent spirituality of some members of the community. It is not so much that some lay people do not believe the abuse took place. It is more that they cannot bear the emotional pain that comes with accepting the reality of betrayal by a trusted priest. The same can be said of evidence of the institutionalized cover-up. Many simply cannot bear the emotional shock of betrayal by the institutional Church.

The betrayal by the clergy and the lay community is a powerful step in the complete disintegration of the victim's religious world and spiritual system. In spite of the assault and related loss of trust in the priest-abuser some victims retained some faith in the community and looked there for support. The conviction of abandonment by God is deepened when the Church community isolates and ostracizes the victim.

*Despair from the loss of God.* Sexual abuse has been aptly described as *soul murder* by victims and their supporters alike. Those who remain secure in their association with God fail to comprehend this concept. Victims, betrayed by the clergy, isolated from the Church community and unable to reach out for support fall deeper into despair. The rupture of their relationship with God is final. This deep spiritual loss leads to additional anxiety, depression and hopelessness.

*Toxic guilt and immobilizing fear.* Far too many clergy abusers have used the power of their role to guarantee the silence of their victims. Children have been threatened with God's wrath if they disclosed. Some have been assured that disclosure would result in serious consequences for their parents or loved ones such as accidents or sickness. Many have been cajoled with guilt-inducing phrases such as "you wouldn't want to hurt the Church" or, "you wouldn't want to hurt a priest." Others have been told that the sexual abuse was a "special thing" between the priest and the victim. The end result of any of these attempts at persuasion is spiritual confusion and isolation. The most toxic consequence is the deep guilt experienced by

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<sup>37</sup> Frawley-O'Dea, op. cit. "*Throughout history and in every segment of society, the most common response to the suspicion or even the disclosure of childhood sexual abuse has been self-defensive denial and dissociation. No one finds it easy to stand in the overwhelming and destabilizing reality of sexual abuse.*"

the victim. This amounts to guilt for having been involved in a sexual act or the assumption of guilt for the perceived sin of the perpetrator. The most debilitating dimension of this guilt is the victim's conviction that he or she has been sexually assaulted by God and therefore has done something terrible to deserve this horrific punishment.

*Loss of spiritual security.* Sexual assault by a Catholic cleric and the betrayal by the Church seriously damages or completely destroys the victim's relationship with Catholicism. However it can also severely damage his or her ability to find spiritual security anywhere. The victim's life and world, which once included a spiritual dimension that provided security and a source of meaning for many of the more profound and deeply influential moments in life, is radically altered. The radical disillusionment is not only with the institutional Church but with the concept of a loving God. The signs, symbols, rituals and persons that represented spiritual security have become harsh reminders of the betrayal and abuse. The realization that one has a spiritual dimension and that this dimension is somehow in contact with a spiritual Higher Power does not emerge out of a vacuum nor is it sustained from nothing. After sexual abuse, many victims experience something they never experienced before and that is the empty feeling that this spiritual bond is worthless because the earthly or finite signs of it are all wrapped up in the betrayal.

*How a person experiences spiritual trauma.* Trauma and post-trauma stress have emotional and physiological effects. The spiritual pain suffered by one who feels cut off or abandoned translates into depression or, in its extreme, despondence. Often there is a significant amount of anxiety that gradually turns to depression. The abused person continually encounters situations that required some form of spiritual support such as deaths, births, illness or loss. The spiritual support experienced by the person came from the external symbols or from the priest or minister to whom he or she turned for support and guidance. The natural reaction to turn to the Church or a priest is met by a psychological or emotional reaction derived from the abuse. The source of security is now a source of pain. The frustration and anxiety are grounded in the perceived futility from seeking a source of spiritual assistance and finding none.

Lay Catholics are formed by the Church to believe that they should be obedient and docile and trust the clergy in all spiritual matters. This blind trust as well as the learned dependence on external symbols and rituals for spiritual comfort is the basis for a dependent spirituality. For most people their formal religious education ended with adolescence, just as they were developing the capacity to wonder, critically evaluate and choose for themselves ethical and moral guidelines. There is only one acceptable way of imaging the Higher Power and His involvement in human life. The childish and unrealistic concept of God as a kind of "super human" with likes, dislikes, anger and happiness is a powerful deterrent for the inquiring believer to move beyond and find in God not a Person who demands total obedience, allegiance and non-stop adoration, but a purely spiritual force of love. Because of the Church's insistence that there is no other way to experience the presence and love of God except through the medium of the visible Church and its ministers, abused and betrayed Catholics have nowhere to turn. Their religious "system" is severely limited by this dependent spirituality and thus unable to

respond to the trauma of betrayal and loss.

*The breaking point in coping comes not only from attacks on significance, but from limitations in the orienting system. It is an axiom of coping that people are not helpless in the face of stress. The orienting system of general beliefs, practices, relationships and emotions can anchor people through stormy times.*<sup>38</sup>

If the abused person's religious system is grounded in a supreme being who is a personal or theistic God and who controls all aspects of life, he or she will hardly be able to process a warm and loving God with the God represented by the priest-abuser. The result can be severe anxiety experienced as the person tries to resolve the ambivalence.

Once the shock of what has happened begins to wear off, a variety of emotions set in and one is anger. For some this naturally begins with anger and rage directed at the abuser but it usually extends to the Church leaders who failed to respond in a compassionate manner. It becomes more firmly entrenched as the victims learn that the Church authorities actually enabled the abuser. The anger can be deepest and therefore most debilitating and controlling if it is grounded in the spiritual betrayal and resulting loss. For most Catholic victims the external Church, with its customs, devotions, absolute teachings and regulations exerted a powerful control over most aspects of life. This control does not evaporate even if the victim separates himself or herself from the Church. The tentacles reach deep into the emotions and the soul and thus enable the anger to retain such a strong hold.

Fear is another emotional and psychic symptom of spiritual trauma. Victims fear that no power can free them from the sin they have committed through the sexual act. At times the perpetrators manipulate this fear and dependence by promising victims dire consequences should they reveal the abuse. Until the victims find a non-toxic image of God, this fear will continue to create emotional pain and even paralysis.

### *Healing the wounds.*

The traditional therapeutic responses to sexual abuse trauma do not always provide relief from spiritual trauma. Anecdotal experience with Catholic clergy abuse victims over the past two decades has shown that most counseling situations did not respond to the spiritual trauma. When the institutional Church has responded to victims it generally has offered psychological but not spiritual counseling. Indeed it appears that Church authorities, all of whom are clerics, were hardly cognizant of the nature and effects of the spiritual trauma. There is no available evidence that any Church office, from the Vatican to national bishops' conferences to local dioceses ever put into place programs or policies to assess the spiritual damage and consequently to respond to it. The late Pope John Paul II publicly acknowledged victims on several occasions

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Pargament, The Psychology of Religion and Coping (New York: The Guildford Press, 1997): p. 341.

but offered only prayer as a healing remedy:

*Therefore, I fully share your sorrow and your concern, especially your concern for the victims so seriously hurt by these misdeeds....So then, venerable brothers, you are faced with two levels of serious responsibility: in relation to the clerics through whom scandal comes and their innocent victims, but also in relation to the whole of society systematically threatened by scandal and responsible for it....I ask you to reflect together with the priests, who are your co-workers, and with the laity, and to respond with all the means at your disposal. Among these means, the first and most important is prayer: ardent, humble, confident prayer.<sup>39</sup>*

*I have been close to you in suffering and prayer, commending to the “God of all comfort” those who have been victims of sexual abuse on the part of clerics or religious.<sup>40</sup>*

*As the Church shows her concern for the victims and strives to respond in truth and justice to each of these painful situations, all of us – conscious of human weakness, but trusting in the healing power of divine grace – are called to embrace the “Mysterium Crucis” and to commit ourselves more fully to the search for holiness.<sup>41</sup>*

The late pope’s call to prayer is mingled with his attempt to shift blame to the secular society. The promise of prayer for victims is really a long-practiced tactic for distancing the cleric from the person requesting help or relief. In this case the pope’s words have provided no relief for victims and consequently are meaningless.

There is no available tradition or font of information about healing the spiritual wounds of clergy sexual abuse. Consequently one can only look at the damage and its sources and respond to each aspect of the trauma. It goes without saying that any therapist working with victims should be well aware of the idiosyncratic nature of sexual abuse by clergy and by Catholic clergy in particular.

*The first level of response should be to the victim’s self-destructive belief system. The immediate concern should be the victims’ concept of a priest. He or she needs to be aided and supported in shedding the magical notion that the priest is somehow the personal representative of God or the stand-in for God. The dependence of the victim on the priest and on the clerical system needs to be first challenged and then replaced with a deeply rooted sense of personal spiritual autonomy. This “adult spirituality” of the victim-priest relationship will bring freedom from the misplaced guilt that burdens so many victims.*

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<sup>39</sup> John Paul II, Letter to the United States Bishops, June 11, 1993, in Origins, Vol. 23(1993), p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> John Paul II, Address to the Bishops of Ireland, 26 June 1999.

<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Priests,” Holy Thursday, 2002.

De-mythologizing the concept of the priest necessarily leads to a re-imagining of the notion of God. This is perhaps the most fundamental and radical dimension of the healing process. Upon it hinges the victim's concept of Church, sin and even self. Catholic theology is rooted in a theistic notion of the Higher Power. God is a supernatural, personal being who controls all aspects of life. It is possible to move to a concept of God that does not lend itself to the toxic beliefs about guilt, suffering, sin and punishment.<sup>42</sup> Such a transition is easiest on the cognitive level but much more challenging to the emotions. Many victims are all too painfully aware of the personal devastation caused by the sexual abuse yet they continue to feel guilt because they have exposed a priest or sued a Church entity such as a diocese. This is all grounded in the irrational belief that God resides in a special way in the institutional Church.

Once a clergy abuse victim begins to accept a Higher Power that is non-judgmental, non-vindictive and not under the control of the ordained office-holders of the Church, he or she will be able to move to the next necessary level of healing which is separating the visible, institutional Church from the Higher Power. This should include an unfolding of the mysterious emotional ties and reactions associated with the victim's relationship to the institutional Church. Once the variety of feelings are acknowledged it is perhaps time to cognitively examine the historical and doctrinal bases for the Church's contention that it was founded by God, is controlled by God through clerics and provides the only authentic source of spiritual security. At this stage the victims may be helped by reading one or more books that provide an objective and scholarly exposition of traditional Church teachings and traditions on the nature of the Church.<sup>43</sup> As they examine concept of the Higher Power they realize that what they have believed in and feared was not an authentic reality but someone else's vision of what god was all about.

*Responding to the Loss of Religion.* The victim's anger at the Church and possibly at religion in general needs to be acknowledged and affirmed as a healthy response to the abuse. If it has not been done earlier in the recovery process this might be the appropriate time to examine the radical distinction between organized religion and spiritual security and strength. The toxic belief that God will be displeased if the victim feels anger towards the Church must be dispelled and replaced with a more realistic belief that the organized religious body has actually been a barrier to a secure relationship with the Higher Power. Victims attribute spiritual power to the visible Church because it has been presented as the only pathway to God. Most Catholics are never allowed to progress beyond a level of spiritual and religious development that is early-adolescent at best. The recovery process from clergy sexual abuse offers a unique opportunity for spiritual maturity. This maturity will provide the emotional security needed for whatever choices the victims makes about the place or religion, worship or a higher power in his or her

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<sup>42</sup> See especially John S. Spong, Why Christianity Must Change or Die (San Francisco, Harper, 1999) and A New Christianity for a New World (San Francisco, Harper, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> See, in addition to the cited works by John Spong, Michael Norwood, From Sand to Solid Ground (New York, Crossroad Publishing, 2007), Tomorrow's Catholic (Mystic CT, Twenty-Third Publications, 2000) and Hans Kung, The Catholic Church: A Short History (New York, The Modern Library, 2001).

life.

*Affirming the Church's responsibility.* The institutional Catholic Church has thus far avoided accepting its responsibility for the culture of clergy sexual abuse and cover-up. Church authorities have made public apologies for “mistakes made” and have shifted the blame to others such as the media or the medical profession.<sup>44</sup> Yet no public statement has given evidence of a full awareness of the causality of clergy abuse or of the damage done to those abused.

Victim/survivors need to explore the substance of some of the official apologies and then come to an emotional as well as cognitive acceptance of the fact that the institution and its office holders *will not* because they *cannot* respond in a manner that would reflect full awareness and accepted responsibility. Some victims get “stuck” in an almost endless contentious process trying to get the official Church to realize the enormity of their actions. They need to come to a realization that the Church's narcissistic self-concept of a *perfect society* renders its leaders incapable of comprehending that the responsibility is rooted in the very core of the institutional Catholic Church.

The Church's responsibility is directly related to the process whereby it has educated and formed Catholics from childhood to adulthood. The victims need to be able to see this as effective pre-conditioning that is related not only to the grooming for the abuse itself but also for their subsequent guilt and shame in responding to the violation of their bodies and souls. A key aspect of this process is the concept of sexuality internalized by most Catholics. The guilt, shame and fear associated with it are responsible for much of the post-abuse trauma. Re-examining the Church-given sexual awareness can be a slow, difficult and often fear-laden process but it must be done in order to guide the recovering victim in the internalization of a healthier notion of sexuality.

*Finding an authentic spirituality.* Most clergy abuse victims did not realize that they had a spiritual dimension to their being until it was taken from them. The final phase of healing involves the discovery of this spiritual dimension and the acceptance of an authentic, life-giving spirituality. God or the Higher Power is re-imaged from an omniscient super person to a source of power and love that is not shaped or limited by human conceptions. The traditional relationship with God was far too enmeshed with loyalty and obedience to the deity's self-styled

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<sup>44</sup> The blame-shifting exists on all levels of Church authority including the papacy. In his first public statement on clergy sexual abuse to the bishops of the U.S., Pope John Paul II said: “*I would also draw your attention to another aspect of the whole question. While acknowledging the right to due freedom of information, one cannot acquiesce in treating moral evil as an occasion for sensationalism. Public opinion often feeds on sensationalism and the mass media play a particular role therein. In fact, the search for sensationalism leads to the loss of something which is essential to the morality of society.*” (Letter to U.S. Bishops, June 11, 1993 in *Origins* July 1, 1993, vol. 23, no. 7)

earthly representatives. When this is abandoned there is room for the transition to a spiritual relationship with a Higher Power or even an institutional Church that is not a source of pain, fear and guilt but rather enhances life and provides joy and balance. This non-toxic spirituality requires a healthy sense of self-worth if it is to take root and grow. The path to emotional and spiritual health is often long, always arduous and usually bewildering at times. Yet it can be traversed with an outcome that promises not only freedom from the spiritual pain but a new and hope-filled future.