
The Impact of Priest Sexual Abuse: Female Survivors' Narratives

Katherine van Wormer and Lois Berns

This article explores the effect of priests' sexual abuse on victimized girls and young women. The data were obtained from in-depth interviews with women who were seeking help years after the violation. The results revealed the following themes: the loss of innocence, a period of self-blame, the loss of religious faith, immense pressure to maintain silence, recognition of the imbalance of power, and healing through outside help. The contribution of the principles of restorative justice to victims' healing is described.

Keywords: *priest abuse; restorative justice; sanctuary molestation; sexual abuse; spirituality*

A great deal of attention has been devoted of late to the sexual abuse of boys by their priests. Many of the reports that have surfaced are of incidents that occurred 30 or more years ago. The trauma that was inflicted on youths by this ultimate form of the violation of personal trust has been manifested in depression, addiction, the loss of religious faith, suicide, and attempted murder (Basu, 2002; McGeary, 2002; Miller & France, 2002; Van Biema, 2002).

Today, more and more former victims of *sanctuary molestation* (a term introduced by Gerdes, Beck, & Miller, 2002) are remembering. From January 2002, when the clerical sex abuse scandal erupted, to June 2002, at least 218 U.S. Catholic priests who are suspected of molesting minors had either resigned or been taken off duty (Cooperman & Sun, 2002). According to a survey conducted by the *Washington Post* (Cooperman & Sun, 2002), at least 850 U.S. priests have been accused of sexual misconduct with children and youths since the early 1960s. The numbers are rising every day. The focus in media accounts and the limited scholarly research on the topic has been on the harm done to boys and young men.

In this article, we present data from the personal narratives of female survivors that show that not only are boys disturbed, often traumatized, by this

inappropriate sexual attention by men of the cloth but that girls are deeply troubled by this kind of unsolicited attention as well. We conclude the article with a discussion of relevant treatment issues and argue that the principles of restorative justice have a major contribution to make to the healing process.

How does sanctuary molestation of a devout Catholic compare to other forms of sexual abuse? In this article, we argue that the damage goes beyond disillusionment with a father figure because the exploiter-abuser was a priest, a “godlike” person, who occupied a position of sacred trust to the youth and his or her family. Furthermore, the victim had not only been violated but his or her source of spiritual support in a time of trouble—the church and its representative—had been rudely swept away. In their interviews, several of the women pointed out that clergy sexual abuse is worse than other forms of sexual abuse in this regard.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The Impact of Clerical Sexual Abuse

Three highly relevant studies of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse by church leaders and clergy have been conducted by Rossetti (1995); Gerdes, Beck, Cowan-Hancock, and Wilkinson-Sparks (1996); and Gerdes et al. (2002). All these studies found that the typical survivor became disillusioned with the church and suffered a loss of religious faith as a result of the abuse and the subsequent institutional response to the abuse. Whereas Rossetti (1995) focused on the Catholic priesthood, the other two studies drew their samples from the Church of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

The priest holds a position of sacred trust and is generally viewed by Catholics as God’s representative on earth (Rossetti, 1995). Sexual abuse by such a trusted figure may lead to a victim’s loss of self-esteem and disillusionment. In his random survey of more than 7,000 active Catholics in the United States and Canada, Rossetti found that 1.7% of the women and 3.3% of the men when they were children had been sexually abused by priests. His documentation seemed to indicate that about twice as many boys as girls experienced such victimization. (We discuss this controversial finding in the next section.) Rossetti noted that adults who had been sexually abused as children by priests reported less trust in the priesthood than did other Catholics. One interesting finding was that the female survivors reported a greater loss of trust in their relationship to God than did the male survivors. Perhaps, as Rossetti speculated, the women were more rejecting of the male-identified God than were the men. Another interesting finding was that persons who had received treatment for the abuse were more aware of their traumatization than were those who had not received treatment.

In a later article on the Catholic Church, Rossetti (2002) differentiated between the treatment outcomes of priests who molested postpubescent minors from those of pedophiles. Priests who had been involved with adolescents instead of with younger children had favorable treatment outcomes, whereas the pedophiles did not. According to data obtained from a church-run facility, Rossetti reported that only 3 of 121 priests who were treated had reoffended 5 to 6 years later. However, these optimistic estimates, as Bryant (2002) indicated, are based on official statistics, such as police data and the sponsoring diocese.

In their study of 71 Mormon women who survived church childhood sexual abuse Gerdes et al. (1996, 2002) found these women's healing journeys were especially difficult because for Mormons, the church pervades most of their social life. Moreover, Mormonism (like Catholicism) is a patriarchal religion. The church's typical reactions, according to the women, were being told to forgive the perpetrator and willful ecclesiastical denial. What many of these women discovered was that to recover, it was important for them to do their own spiritual work. A few turned to their "Heavenly Mother" for courage and comfort. Despite the church's minimal support, the majority of women remained active in church affairs.

Several other excellent resources on the subject of clergy abuse are worthy of mention. Berry (2000) presented an autobiographical account of a Catholic's investigation of an infamous Louisiana case from the 1980s. In his passionate conclusion, Berry blasted the Catholic Church as a dysfunctional family and argued for optional priestly celibacy. In addition, collectively, the essays in Plante's (1999) edited volume outlines a clinical agenda for professionals in dealing with sexual abuse. Among the recommendations are better screening methods for weeding out unhealthy types of people and higher professional standards for dealing with errant members of the clergy. Finally, Kennedy (2001), a former Catholic priest, presented a sociological thesis that Catholicism will have a hard time righting its wrongs because so much of its institutional power depends on keeping its members in a dependent state. The "unhealed wound" in the title of Kennedy's book refers to Catholicism's failure to deal with sexuality in a mature fashion. The church's inability to deal with human sexuality is a compounding problem. Kennedy made a strong case for ending the unnatural mandate for celibacy by priests. Such a requirement, he suggested, attracts young men who are psychologically and emotionally immature.

Although the child protection laws in most states require leaders, health professionals, counselors, and social workers, among others, to report suspected child abuse, clergy are often exempt from this requirement ("Catholics Need Tough Policy," 2002). The inner turmoil facing the clergy in such a situation was poignantly revealed in the British movie, *Priest* (Bird, 1994). This movie tackled the dilemma of a priest who was privy in confession to a situation of incest—a situation that haunted him because of his belief in the

sanctity of the confessional. A mandatory reporting law would help resolve such a dilemma in favor of justice.

Are Boys Victimized More Often Than Girls?

There is little in the sociological literature that we could draw on to refute or substantiate the claims about the male/female victimization ratio (Investigative Staff, 2002). Rossetti's (1995) random survey of Catholics seemed to indicate that about twice as many boys as girls had been victimized by priests. Even if one assumes that his figure is correct, one can still see that many of the female respondents, almost 2% of all the women who were surveyed, were victimized at a young age by their priests. Yet newspaper accounts are misleading in that they have focused almost exclusively on the violation of boys.

Concerning the assumption that victimization by priests is largely a violation of male youths, commentators have been of two minds. Proponents of the first view have argued that the disproportionate number of young male victims indicates that in the past, the church had easier access to boys than to girls. For example, the Investigative Staff of the *Boston Globe* (2002) attributed the apparent male-female discrepancy in victims of priest sexual abuse to the fact that parents of girls and young women would expect them to be chaperoned on outings with priests. Before the scandal broke, when priests invited boys to go on outings, such as baseball games, no questions would have been asked. Keep in mind that until recently, only boys could be altar boys (servers) who worked alongside priests.

Richard Sipe, a Catholic priest and psychologist who specializes in cases of priest sexual abuse (cited in Reed, 2002), conducted personal interviews with more than 129 sexually abusive priests and found that the majority of adult victims were women. Among adolescents and children, however, the majority of reported victims were male. Sipe conceded that this may be a case of reporting bias. Older girls and their parents, he suggested, may feel protective of priests and not so likely to be repulsed by heterosexual acts than boys and their parents may be at homosexual acts.

The second aspect of sexual abuse by priests concerns the role of homosexuality in this crisis. According to the *Boston Globe* reporters (Investigative Staff, 2002), church experts estimate that between 30% and 50% of the 45,000 U.S. priests are gay. The disproportionate media attention to the harm to male victims has resulted, according to these investigators, in the Vatican's targeting of gay men as scapegoats for the crisis of clergy sexual abuse. Yet there is no reason to assume that gay priests are more apt to molest boys and young men than are heterosexual priests to molest girls and young women.

Proponents of the second view of the situation (see, e.g., Reed, 2002; "Thousands of Nuns Sexually Victimized," 2003; Tolbert, 2003) have contended that the plight of female victims of priest sexual abuse has been largely overlooked by the media and that this form of victimization has been

trivialized. Even worse, young female victims are often seen as seducers of young and supposedly vulnerable male priests. Given the statistics on the sexual abuse of adolescents, in general, which have shown that girls are far more likely than boys to be so victimized, the proponents of this view doubted the accuracy of the statistics on abuse by clergy that have indicated that boys are more often abused than are girls, however they did not provide any data to support their conclusions. One empirically based study that provided some information on this issue was a nationwide survey of more than 1,000 nuns from a variety of orders ("Thousands of Nuns," 2003). The findings revealed that 1 in 5 nuns had been sexually abused as children and that 9% of these violations had been by priests, nuns, or other religious persons. Unfortunately, the exact breakdown of the violators was not provided; however, as the authors of the study noted, the rampant sexual abuse of nuns by priests in Africa was a recent international scandal, so nuns may be vulnerable in the Western world as well.

THE STUDY

In the following study, the term *victim* is used to stress the act of being injured and victimized, whereas the term *victim/survivor* or *survivor* is used to refer to the individual, usually at a later stage in life, who has lived through, survived, the ordeal and is in the process of healing. Whereas the term *victim* refers to one or more events in a person's life, the term *survivor* is far more empowering.

What is the psychological toll on girls and women of sanctuary molestation? What is the impact on the survivor's religious faith? How do child and adolescent victims of sexual abuse by priests come to view the power dynamics of the church in later life? To answer these questions, the second author, herself a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, conducted in-depth interviews with nine fellow victims/survivors. She located the women from a sample of attenders of conferences and workshops for victims/survivors of priest sexual misconduct. Face-to-face ethnographic interviews were conducted with eight women, and a telephone interview was conducted with a ninth woman who was otherwise unavailable. All the women, who ranged in age from 33 to 79 years, were White and had been Roman Catholic from birth; all had been sexually exploited/abused by Catholic priests, some in childhood; and all had lived in a cloak of secrecy and experienced disapproval by the institutional church.

METHOD

The guiding methodological framework was a feminist perspective. Central to a feminist method is the search for a woman's story in her own voice

(Bricker-Jenkins, 1990). This approach has the advantage of allowing the interviewer to gather data by delving into the reality of the women's lives from their subjective experiences. Consistent with the feminist focus on collaboration and self-disclosure, the interviewer revealed the interviewer's personal identity as someone "who had been there" and assured the women that her goal was in no way exploitative. The informal, conversational style of the process permitted the women to say as much or as little as their comfort level allowed. The first goal of the research was not to gather quantitative data but to record the meaning of the experience of abuse to the women involved. The second goal was to explore the psychological impact of clergy sexual abuse/exploitation and the reaction by the religious community to the problem when it was revealed.

All the women were asked the same questions, which focused on three main themes: What happened? When did you recognize what happened was abuse? And at what point did you realize that what happened was an abuse of power? Although the questions served as a guide, they were not asked in a linear fashion. Thus, the women could reconstruct their answers in their own context. In keeping with feminist tenets, less structure in the interview instrument gave the participants greater control. Not once, in either of the two interviews with each woman, did any woman choose not to answer a question.

The women were interviewed on two separate occasions from 1998 to 2000 and were asked to reflect, retrospectively, about their experiences. Their responses were recorded on tape so that their words could be reproduced verbatim.

FINDINGS

Gravity of the Violation

The women's encounters with the priests ranged from rape in childhood to fondling in young adulthood and other unwelcome advances. The key factor was the shock that the women felt at the time, combined with the disillusionment that set in over the years. The women felt disillusioned by the event or events and by the religious community's refusal to hear their complaints, to validate their suffering.

All found that their faith in God had been at least temporarily shattered. An unexpected finding was that all the women had lost their own fathers early in life or were emotionally estranged from their fathers. Further research with a larger sample is needed to explore the significance of this finding. We can only speculate that a relationship with a father figure in the form of a priest might have helped fill a gap in their lives.

In examining these women's narrative statements, one should bear in mind that these women who were exploited/abused by priests initially, in

their girlhoods, were highly religious and involved in the church. It was their very religiosity, paradoxically, that enhanced their vulnerability. Having been heavily active in church affairs and rituals, they were in closer proximity to the priests than were women who had a more carefree attitude toward the church. Perhaps their lack of a close relationship with their fathers played into the scenario as well.

When asked to describe how their families had practiced their faith or how their families had related to the Catholic Church, the women responded with statements such as these: "The church was important"; "We had a strong Catholic background, we attended Catholic school"; "The sacraments were important, especially the Eucharist"; and "I never really thought of it as a religion. It was more or less a way of life." Without exception, the women came from backgrounds that took Catholicism seriously. Consistently, they noted that the emotional impact of these rituals was pronounced.

Because the priest represents the church, and the church represents religion in a devout Catholic family, the child or adolescent who is fondled or otherwise sexually exploited by a priest has nowhere to turn. In addition, if she (or he) successfully exposes the priest as a predator, many church attenders will be disillusioned. Molly, for example, took it upon herself to protect the church:

It was like my responsibility to keep the code of silence . . . not to keep it just for myself, but for the Church, the priest, my family, friends . . . anyone who would be scandalized. . . . People would call me names. I *had* to protect the Church.

Susan was threatened:

I can still hear his [the priest's] voice, "Don't you dare tell anyone, or you'll be sorry." I was still in high school and trembling, scared to death. But I didn't tell anyone because of the guilt. I was scared, but I had to learn Latin. I couldn't quit because then my mother and the principal would have asked me why. And I had no other reason to quit. . . . It was sort of like he was held up on the pedestal by the Church and everyone was honoring him, and you saw this and thought the problem was you.

Because Maria was victimized by her stepfather and her priest, she was in a position to compare the two experiences:

I know what it's like to be a victim in a church and outside a church. It is different. When it's done in a church [by a representative of the church], it holds even more power over you—if you can believe that—more power over you than [abuse by my] stepfather. As horrific as my abuse was at the hands of my stepfather, with [the priest], I had to piece together my soul. My stepfather did not shatter the inner core of my being as it was with [the priest]. It was split into parts at times, but not shattered. . . . You are not only raped physically and

emotionally, but when someone messes with your spirituality, you are in for a whole lot of problems.

Similarly, Susan explained,

Clergy abuse is so much worse because the priests have more power than anybody and represent . . . well they are supposed to represent God, and so . . . they represent not only their position in the Church, but they are supposed to represent Christ [laughs] at Mass. So you know there's real power play thing going on.

Before we address the specifics of the psychological toll and its aftermath, we examine the power dynamics of the clergy-parishioner relationship to which Susan referred.

Power Dynamics

The sexualized relationship between professional and client is seen as a violation of professional ethics mainly because of the imbalance in power that inhibits the recipient of such attentions from saying no. Sex that appears to be consensual may not really be so, and when the target is a child, of course, the imbalance in power is at its most extreme. Sexual contact with parishioners of any age, however, are off limits and exploitative.

The power of members of the clergy is enhanced by the trappings of their religious position, including the mysterious rituals they enact, and by their role in pastoral counseling. The clergy's very bearing and manner of dress call attention to their moral authority.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the ordained priest holds a position of sacred trust. Schmitz (1996), who has conducted extensive research on priests (through personal interviews), described the traditional role of the priest as a mediator between the transcendent God and human beings. By hearing confessions, the priest becomes privy to his parishioners' innermost secrets. Only he can help them achieve forgiveness. Between the sacred and the profane, the priest is seen as being closer to the sacred.

How one can abuse one's power through cruel manipulation was revealed in the stories told by three women who were interviewed on *60 Minutes* ("Catholic Church Cover Up," Hewitt, 2002). One woman told how flattered she had been when, as a teenager, the priest likened her to the Virgin of Guadalupe and then made love to her. The theme of incest also emerged in the discussion. "If only your father knew what he was missing," the priest reportedly said to one woman.

Sexual relationships with female parishioners reinforce the traditional male power dynamic; the emphasis in this dynamic is on power over, rather than on power with. As one participant, Barbara, stated:

That was the beginning. . . . I was his sex slave. . . . I hate to even use the word, but he told me I was special. God! I hate that word! He not only raped me physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He used his power and position to control my mind . . . my body . . . my soul.

Maria's comment also reflected this idea: "It is kind of seductive—you are mesmerized. . . . I felt special." And Catherine said: "I was brainwashed. . . . He took me out to dinner, and somehow I felt placated, for he was beginning to own me."

Several of the participants had experienced some kind of sexual violation earlier in life, before their encounters with the priests. This earlier violation would have increased their vulnerability, as research on childhood sexual trauma has demonstrated (Fieldman & Crespi, 2002). Molly, for example, carried the scars of prior victimization: "I really couldn't say no. I had no power. Even when I felt something was wrong with what was happening, I couldn't say no. I mean, I was sexually abused as a kid—when I was 9. Maybe that's why. . . . Maybe I didn't care."

Maria's situation is, unfortunately, all too common. The person in whom she confided about an incident of sexual abuse took advantage of her trust and vulnerability:

It's important for you to know . . . I have to tell you why. I had been sexually abused as a child . . . [Prior to her abuse by the priest], I was hospitalized. I was a mess . . . a basket case. I had a nervous breakdown. I totally lost it, so I went to Paul, my priest, for help.

When a spiritual leader violates a woman's boundaries, he tramples on the church's ability to provide sustaining spiritual guidance, and because of threats to the woman's reputation if she seeks help, he robs her of an arena in which to participate and receive succor from the parish community. Victimized women are often not able to return to any church because their trust has been so violated.

That trust is doubly violated, first by the acting-out priest and, second, by other representatives of the church. Elizabeth told how she was silenced:

I told another priest I was going public, and he told me I was possessed . . . And I went to Confession to still another priest and said something about going public. He said it would cause a great scandal. . . . This was a priest I really respected. . . . It was really hard. I decided not to because [sighs] . . . I have a psychiatric hospitalization on record, and that information could hurt me.

It is not surprising that Elizabeth's religious faith suffered; the sense of betrayal was overwhelming. She received limited support, not to mention spiritual healing, from other devout Catholics, who typically found the message that their beloved priest was a sexual predator too intolerable to

bear. Gerdes et al. (1996) reported the same phenomenon among Mormon spiritual leaders. All the Catholic women who were interviewed reported that they were forced into secrecy, often after a few failed attempts to get help. Most responded either by repressing the memory for long periods or by blaming themselves. Most felt stigmatized, "dirty," or "marked" by their experiences.

Impact on Religious Faith

Individually and collectively, the women said that, at first, they were not able to recognize or name their experiences as sexual abuse/exploitation. It was only over time and after a myriad of awakenings that they subjectively discerned the significance of what had happened to them. For most of them, the identifying moment came years later as a result of a social or reform movement or as a result of therapy. When the participants were able to recognize the sexual abuse/exploitations as such, recognition of it as the abuse of power followed closely. Accounts in the news media and books and attendance at retreats, conferences, and workshops provided a context through which they came to understand and name their victimization and its impact on their lives.

Sadly, the women said that being sexually abused/exploited by their priests adversely affected their relationship with God. Several women expressed confusion and ambivalence about the existence of God, while others described God as cruel, hostile, angry, and filled with revenge. Although two women felt the presence of God in their lives as they were going through the trauma and one entered a convent, they were the exceptions. Most of the women suffered spiritual damage. Not only had they endured personal violation but also now found themselves without a spiritual home.

Four women who grew up with the belief in God as a male authority figure said that they had come to believe that the gender of God changed after their abuse/exploitation. This phenomenon was reported by Gerdes et al. (1996) as well. This is probably a fairly healthy response: replacing the male-identified Higher Power with a motherly source of nurturance and thereby holding on to their religious faith.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT

When an incident of priest sexual abuse has occurred, there are two parties in need of treatment—the victim, who needs support and reassurance, and the priest, who needs some kind of behavior modification, so that, even if he is dismissed from the priesthood, he will not continue his aberrant and harmful behavior. The removal and treatment of the offending priest are

important, however the specifics of the treatment are beyond the scope of this article.

Treatment for Victims/Survivors

As the personal narratives of survivors of priest sexual abuse (male and female) have revealed, the church's silence in the aftermath of the abuse has caused as much agony and distress as the initial incidents themselves. Recognition of the truth about what happened, of the gravity of the wrong that was done, of the fact that the victim/survivor was abused—violated—and that it was not her fault are the first steps toward recovery for the survivor and for the church. Ironically, the international outcry over the recent sex scandal involving the children who were molested by priests may help provide the public (and internal) vindication that they so desperately need.

Another positive development is the training of therapists in the need for trauma work with these survivors, especially to work through the issues of sexual trauma during childhood and adolescence. Attention to the spiritual dimension is also needed, so that victims of sanctuary molestation can be validated in their feelings of grief and loss. An understanding of the power dynamics of the religious community is essential as well. (Fortunately, the social work profession has recently added attention to spirituality as a key dimension of social work knowledge of human behavior (Council on Social Work Education, 2003). Molly, similar to some of the other women who were interviewed, got professional help from someone who could help her address the spiritual as well as sexual component in her trauma. As she explained,

I had a good therapist—a woman who understands there is a difference. My ideas of God were so closely related to the Church—at least given to me by the Church. [The therapist is] Catholic, too, which I think makes it easier. I trust her . . . well, at least, most of the time. We talk about spiritual stuff. . . . She just understands that spiritual stuff is important to me. It's who I am.

Counseling with the right person, in short, can be extremely helpful. Such an individual can help a violated child or woman regain her faith in human nature, in her religious beliefs, and in herself. One woman got solace from a nun who "to this day is a godsend to me."

The Relevance of Restorative Justice Techniques

The principles of restorative justice, which are often contrasted with a focus on retribution, are highly relevant to the needs of the perpetrators and survivors of clergy sexual abuse (see van Wormer, 2001). Restorative justice is a philosophy that is derived from traditional forms of justice associated with indigenous peoples and is consistent with the religious teachings of

Mennonites (see van Wormer, 2001; Zehr, 1995). The restorative model is victim, rather than offender, centered. Restorative justice views crime as primarily a violation of people and relationships. Justice occurs through offenders taking full responsibility for what they have done to the victims and the community. Society must be accountable to the victims to help them restore what was lost.

An Internet search of newspaper articles on the resolution of cases of clergy abuse revealed one instance in which restorative principles were used. This case, from the diocese of Providence, Rhode Island, involved lawsuits filed by 36 people who were sexually abused, in which such principles were applied (Carroll, 2002). Final settlements were in various amounts that were proportionate to the severity of the abuse. What is remarkable about the case is that it was not resolved adversarially but through marathon mediation sessions. Church representatives treated the survivors with empathy; instead of attacking the victims' stories, they showed compassion and offered apologies. Consistent with the principles of restorative justice, the emphasis was on helping the victims, church, and community heal from the wrongs that had been done.

Geared to the needs of the victim/survivor and to her desire to express the truth in her own voice and to have the truth validated by the offending party, restorative justice aims for reconciliation. Unlike the adversarial criminal justice process, with restorative justice, the offender is called on to explain himself to the victim and community and often to begin to make amends. The restorative process can take place either in addition to or instead of the standard judicial process. A major advantage of this format is the inclusion of family members, who, similar to the survivor, express to the offender and, in this case, the church authorities, the extent of their sufferings. Often apologies are forthcoming.

For the female survivor who, unlike the male survivor, is apt to be partially blamed for the sexual involvement, this support by the church and community are vital for her recovery. Additional advantages of this non-adversarial approach are the restoration of a sense of control over one's life, the opportunity to confront the person or persons who have committed the harm and to ask why, hearing a confession, and embarking on a journey toward healing. For the offender, it is a chance to "come clean"; to offer restitution, if applicable; and even to ask for forgiveness. Because restorative justice has its origins in religious forms of resolving disputes, it is especially relevant within a church context and consistent with Christian faith in the possibility of redemption.

CONCLUSION

This article shows that although the mass media have focused attention on young male victims of clergy sexual abuse, the sexual violation of young

women has gone largely unnoticed. Yet the evidence is that the suffering engendered by young women's victimization is pronounced. Compared to male victims, who have had to wrestle with the homosexuality dimension, female victims, according to what evidence is available, have reported that they underwent a major crisis in religious faith. In addition, as the participants in the current study revealed, these girls and young women received little community support when they sought help from their friends and other confidantes; most typically, they were silenced. Such healing as did occur took place through social and therapeutic support, often years later.

A perusal of the narratives presented in this article reveals that the aftermath of the sexual victimization involved, for the girls and young women, a second victimization. Instead of the support they needed, their needs were ignored, and their reputations were often besmirched. As is known from studies of survivors of rape, a crucial factor in their recovery is the immediate response from significant others and authorities (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). If trauma is to be prevented, early intervention is essential.

What can be learned from these personal narratives of survivors of Catholic sanctuary molestation is relevant to other clergy abuse as well. Social workers can play an active role in helping youths express their feelings of disillusionment and loss—the loss of trust, of innocence, and even, in some cases, of religious faith. Social workers have two obvious advantages over other members of the helping professions in regard to their professional training. The first advantage is their systems orientation and willingness to involve family members in the counseling process (which is crucial to help survivors rebuild their self-esteem). The second advantage, unique to social work, is the holistic approach that addresses human behavior from a biopsychosocial and spiritual perspective. The word *spiritual* is emphasized here because, as the women's narratives have revealed, the church was a major support system and place of solace in times of trouble, and the injury inflicted on the women by "men of the cloth" was an injury to their souls. The implication for social workers is that they must address the spiritual side of pain and healing, as well as the psychosocial aspects, even in situations that are not directly related to the church or church community.

At the policy level, social workers can attend workshops on restorative justice techniques and advocate for the introduction of restorative processes to the community to help survivors of wrongdoing heal from the harm that has been done and to help heal the harm that has been done to families and the community when a basic trust was violated. The role of the institutional church in restoring a sense of wholeness to the individual and to the community is one that should not go unrecognized.

The church's acknowledgment of the magnitude of the damage done through years of denial and deception is the first step toward restoring such wholeness. A stringent crackdown on those who sexually abuse children and adolescents is the second step. Only through these means can further

victimization be prevented and the Catholic Church's tarnished reputation somehow be restored. For all measures taken, there must be oversight by lay Catholics and the reporting of criminal cases to the authorities. The restorative process has a great potential to help victims/survivors, offenders, and the church heal from the wrong that was done.

Also at the policy level, the admission of women to the priesthood and a reevaluation of the enforced celibacy rule are two undertakings that are worthy of consideration. Either or both of these commonsensical innovations should help provide a much larger pool of intelligent, healthy candidates for the priesthood.

REFERENCES

- Basu, R. (2002, May 12). Alleged abuse by priest linked to '85 suicide. *Des Moines Register*, pp. 1A, 4A.
- Berry, J. (2000). *Lead us not into temptation: Catholic priests and the sexual abuse of children*. New York: Doubleday.
- Bird, A. (Director). (1994). *Priest* [Motion picture]. London: BBC Films.
- Bricker-Jenkins, M. (1990). Another approach to practice and training. *Public Welfare*, 48(2), 10-17.
- Bryant, C. (2002, April 1). Psychological treatment of priest sex offenders. *America*, 187(15), 14-17.
- Carroll, M. (2002, September 10). \$13.5 million settlement in Rhode Island clergy abuse. *Boston Globe*. Available at www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse
- Catholics need tough policy to stem abuse. (2002, April 28). *Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier*, p. C8.
- Cooperman, A., & Sun, L. H. (2002, June 9). Hundreds of priests removed since the '60s. *Washington Post*, p. A1.
- Council on Social Work Education. (2003). *Handbook of accreditation standards and procedures* (5th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Fieldman, J. P., & Crespi, T. D. (2002). Child sexual abuse: Offenders disclosure, and school-based initiative. *Adolescence*, 37, 151-160.
- Gerdes, K. E., Beck, M. N., Cowan-Hancock, S., & Wilkinson-Sparks, T. (1996). Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse: The case of Mormon women. *Affilia*, 11, 39-60.
- Gerdes, K. E., Beck, M. N., & Miller, H. (2002, April 1). Betrayal of a sacred trust: "Sanctuary trauma" in sexual abuse survivors. *Social Work Today*, 2(7), 6-11.
- Hewitt, D. (Producer). (2002, April 21). *60 minutes* [Television series]. New York: CBS.
- Investigative Staff of the *Boston Globe*. (2002). *Betrayal: The crisis in the Catholic Church*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Kennedy, E. (2001). *The unhealed wound: The church and human sexuality*. New York: St. Martin's.
- McGeary, J. (2002, April 1). Can the church be saved? *Time*, 29-40.
- Miller, L., & France, D. (2002, March 3). Sins of the fathers. *Newsweek*, 43-52.
- Plante, T. (Ed.). (1999). *Bless me father for I have sinned: Perspectives on sexual abuse committed by Roman Catholic priests*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Reed, C. L. (2002, March 27). The gay purge. *Survivors' Network*. Available at www.survivorsnetwork.org/Gay_Priests/The_Gay_Purge.htm
- Rossetti, S. (1995). The impact of child sexual abuse on attitudes toward God and the Catholic Church. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19, 1469-1481.
- Rossetti, S. (2002, April 22). The Catholic Church and child sexual abuse: Distortions, complexities and resolutions. *America*, 186, 8-15.
- Schmitz, R. E. (1996). Of dinosaurs, carrier pigeons and disappearing priests. *America*, 175(10), 7-11.

- Schwartz, M., & DeKeseredy, W. S. (1997). *Sexual assault on the college campus: The role of male peer support*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thousands of nuns sexually victimized, survey shows. (2003, January 5). *Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier*, p. A3.
- Tolbert, M. (2003). *Where have all the young girls gone? Clergy sexual misconduct: Perspectives*. Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry. Available at www.clgs.org
- Van Biema, D. (2002, May 22). Making a priest pay. *Time*, 56.
- van Wormer, K. (2001). *Counseling female offenders and victims: A strengths-restorative approach*. New York: Springer.
- Waits, E. A. (1993). *Trauma and survival*. New York: Norton.
- Zehr, H. (1995). *Changing lenses*. Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press.

Katherine van Wormer, Ph.D., is a professor of social work, University of Northern Iowa, 36 Sabin Hall, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0405; e-mail: katherine.vanwormer@uni.edu.

Lois Berns, MA, is a dual-diagnosis case manager, Emma Norton Residence, 670 North Robert Street, St. Paul, MN 55101-2523; e-mail: lois@emmanorton.org.

Request Permission or Order Reprints Instantly

Interested in copying, sharing, or the repurposing of this article? U.S. copyright law, in most cases, directs you to first get permission from the article's rightsholder before using their content.

To lawfully obtain permission to reuse, or to order reprints of this article quickly and efficiently, click on the "Request Permission/ Order Reprints" link below and follow the instructions. For information on Fair Use limitations of U.S. copyright law, please visit [Stamford University Libraries](#), or for guidelines on Fair Use in the Classroom, please refer to [The Association of American Publishers' \(AAP\)](#).

All information and materials related to SAGE Publications are protected by the copyright laws of the United States and other countries. SAGE Publications and the SAGE logo are registered trademarks of SAGE Publications. Copyright © 2003, Sage Publications, all rights reserved. Mention of other publishers, titles or services may be registered trademarks of their respective companies. Please refer to our user help pages for more details: <http://www.sagepub.com/cc/faq/SageFAQ.htm>

[Request Permissions / Order Reprints](#)