The Sexual Abuse Crisis: What Have We Learned and What Issues Do We Still Have to Face?

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What Have We Learned?

I come to this conference as a psychologist and as a person raised in the Jewish tradition. I was first introduced to the reality of child sexual abuse in the Church in a very unusual way. It was during the early 1970's when I was an intern in Clinical Child psychology in Boston. I had a close colleague who told me in the coffee room one day that he had been a priest, and had left the priesthood. I knew he was a devout Catholic, and asked, "Michael, why did you leave the priesthood?" He replied, "Well, I was assigned to a large city institution that took in boys from the streets, and I discovered that these boys were being taken in and being molested by the members of the clergy and by the director of this institution. I couldn't reconcile that with my values and beliefs as a Catholic and as a priest. I had to go. I couldn't deal with it. I had to leave." And so, there's another fallout from these issues, which is the good men you have lost who otherwise would have been fine priests, as my friend Michael became a wonderful social worker in the lay world.

But why didn't I ask, "Michael, why didn't you tell someone?" I didn't ask Michael because in 1972 I didn't think to ask, and Michael to my knowledge didn't tell anyone in the church either.

This story can be seen as an indicator both of Michael's context and the culture in which he was embedded as a priest, where he couldn't or wouldn't tell, and also of the times. I was a young psychologist, still a few years from my degree. I was learning about children and adults, and mental illness and health, but I wasn't learning what I needed to ask, "Why didn't you tell?" And so I do feel that there's been a process of growth, and development, of discovery and recognition.

In my remarks this morning I will try to give you some sense of where I think the church and all of us need to go at this point. In his remarks this morning, Archbishop Harry J. Flynn talked about looking through the eyes of the victims and the parents. I think he is right on target with that kind of expansion of the framework. As Reverend Fortune indicated, the church's institutional agenda is just not an adequate framework for understanding the problems you face or their solutions.

I would also argue that it's important to look through the eyes of abusers. Otherwise, you would have an imperfect sense of what you need to know to protect yourselves and the children that depend on you. Let's begin by looking at the world from the perspective on who sexually abuses children. First, relinquish the idea that they look different from you or me. Anyone in the room and anyone outside this room could molest children. They

are often very nice people. Niceness is the best mask for an abuser to wear (De Becker, 1997, p. 56).

The majority of child sexual abusers are male. Most have fantasies about sex with children, and their inner lives are preoccupied with children. In fact, they become accomplished at living double lives. If they didn't, they couldn't trap children. If their motives were evident, they couldn't gain contact with children and acquire access to them, and enforce secrecy in their conduct of sex. These men are usually compulsively driven to have sex with children, and some, though not all are sadistic and/or psychopathic. But they don't look it! (Salter, 2003, p. 31)

The church is an ideal setting for people who want access to children in order to prey on them. It is a community of trusting people, as are most communities of faith. These are communities in which our natural inclination is to trust in each other's goodness, good will, and shared values. For that reason, our guard is down and we don't recognize someone in our midst that might hurt our children.

The church is also ideal because of the cover of celibacy. Does celibacy cause sexual abuse? I doubt it. But does an institution that is celibate provide a cover for someone who otherwise would not be interested in adult consensual sex? Absolutely.

The priesthood also provides authority and legitimacy. As a consequence, you have to assume that people who want access to children, people who seek opportunity, secrecy,

and power and credibility with children in order to groom them for sexual relationships, will enter the priesthood.

In order to protect children, you have to assume that there will always be sexual abusers in the priesthood, despite your best efforts to screen them out. We'll talk more later about how you can better protect children from those who would prey on them, a problem not only in the church, but also in other high-risk institutions such as Big Brothers and Boy Scouts.

My husband, Dr. Eli Newberger, and I once consulted on a case of a pediatrician pedophile that offered his services to adolescents who had worries about their sexuality. Once he had them alone in his office, he masturbated the boys to ejaculation, and kept detailed records about each child. Does this mean that all pediatricians are pedophiles? Obviously not. It does mean that in order to protect children, a parent or a nurse should be in pediatricians' offices whenever they examine children (Newberger C & Newberger E, 1986).

We have to assume that pedophiles will be among us, and that we have to do what is necessary to make sure that they do not have opportunities to have access to children in order to exploit them.

Now let's talk about what the world is like for children who have been abused by priests.

In order to give you a sense of what the experience of victimization might be like for a child, I'd like to tell you a hypothetical story. This story is about something I worry about every day, why I worry about it, and why it's important to worry about it. The story concerns Eli's and my grandson, who is five years old. I'll call him Jonah, to protect his privacy. Eli and I help take care of our two grandchildren, and often pick Jonah up after his day in pre-kindergarten. I have recurring anxieties about being late. Jonah knows that when he comes out of his classroom that Baba and Nana, or Mommy or Daddy will be waiting for him. He lives in a world of safety, protection, and care, but he doesn't even think about being safe, protected, and cared for. It just happens. But what if, one day, Jonah came out of the classroom and we weren't there. What if he waited, and waited, and waited, and the teacher took him back into the classroom to wait some more after all the other children had been picked up, and still we didn't come.
And what if we had a flat tire and had been trying desperately to get there, but couldn't in time. And finally, one-half hour later, we rush in to the classroom and pick up Jonah. This has never happened to Jonah, but is my recurrent worry.

If this were to happen, in that one-half hour Jonah's whole worldview would have changed. It would have fundamentally, seismically shifted. Jonah would no longer be innocently operating in a world in which he is safe, in which adults are predictably there, in which he is reliably picked up and nourished and protected. He would now be in a world where he can't trust that when he gets out of that classroom, someone will be there. Such a seismic shift is what occurs when someone has been in a world in which he or she has been cared for, and all of a sudden discovers that bad things can happen in that good

world. We're not talking about bad things like being punished for stealing cookies out of the cookie jar, but bad things in the very fabric of a child's sense of safety, the very fabric of the meaning of people and places in the child's life.

Such a seismic shift happens when children are sexually abused–by anyone. Their worldview changes, and it makes them untrusting, fearful, and anxious. It can take a long time to win back a child's trust, but trust never returns entirely. The child has learned something fundamental, which is that trustworthiness cannot be taken for granted. This represents a level of cognitive awareness that did not exist before the abuse. Now the child realizes, "Things can go wrong and I have to watch out" (Dodge, Bates, and Pettit, 1990). Now, these are lessons that everyone learns sooner or later, but you don't want children to learn them through trauma, you want them to learn them through appropriate, educative means.

Unlike the normal lessons children learn, and the lessons children learn from the trauma of natural disasters, sexual abuse comes wrapped in other layers of trauma. One is the layer of betrayal. Child sexual abuse is usually defined as sexual contact with someone five years or more older than the child, often a person that a child would naturally assume would protect rather than harm (Finkelhor, 1979). Child abuse that takes place within the family is a particularly harmful betrayal because it shatters the assumption that people who take care of them, who purport to love them, won't hurt them. Not only do sexually abused children learn that they can no longer trust that they will be predictably safe and

protected, they also learn that people they rely on may actually intend to harm them (Freyd, 1998).

Professionals in the field no longer doubt that childhood abuse can cause grave psychological harm (e.g. Ackerman, Newton, McPherson, Jones, & Dykman, 1998; Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1996; Collings, 1995; Jumper, 1995; Neumann, Houskamp, Pollock, & Briere, 1996; Newberger & De Vos, 1988; Newberger & Gremy, in press; Newberger, CM Gremy, Waternaux, & Newberger, EH, 1993; Polusny & Follette, 1995). Recent research also reveals that childhood abuse changes the brain in ways that may enduringly compromise emotional stability (Cromdie, 2003).

The church is also a place that takes care of people, where children experience and believe in the love of that church and its members for them, and by extension, the love of God for them. What's different about clergy abuse is that it shatters not only trust in the behavior and intentions of those who give care to children, but also trust in the systems of beliefs that give children a sense of meaning and community in their lives.

What are the effects of abuse by a priest? Betrayals of that magnitude are likely to make its victims feel and be pretty irrational. It can create in different people confusion, guilt, fear, intrusive dreams or recollections, jumpiness and irritability, difficulties concentrating, suspicions of the intentions of others, physical symptoms, feelings of worthlessness, and depression. If a person is vulnerable to unwanted and intrusive re-experiencing of the abuse, and his or her functioning is threatened by the disruptive

symptoms that so frequently accompany trauma, that person is simultaneously going to be trying to avoid people, objects, and settings that will trigger those symptoms (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; March & Amaya-Jackson, 1993).

Many of you may have been puzzled by some victims' responses to being interviewed, for example, in Church chanceries. Given what we have just talked about, if you put yourself in their shoes, you cannot assume that a setting in which you derive comfort and meaning is also going to be a setting in which they can feel comfortable, or even emotionally safe. And so, let's return to Archbishop Flynn's focus on putting yourself in the eyes of victims and the eyes of parents, who have experienced betrayal, too, through the church's abuse of their children. Those who would reach out to victims need continually to be monitoring and asking, "What would be best for you? We would like to reach out to you. Would you welcome that, or is that something you don't feel ready for right now? Will you let me know if and when you feel ready? Would you like to speak with me? On what terms would that be most comfortable for you?"

One needs always, not just the church but anyone who deals with victims that come from an environment in which people have been betrayed, to be respectful of where they are coming from, and to understand that the loss of trust that is inherent in being victimized, means that there may also be a loss of trust in what you hold most fundamental. That loss of trust must be respected, and perhaps at some future point that trust may be restored. But it will not re-emerge of you tell them what they should believe, how they

should feel, or how they should behave. Trust can only re-emerge if you can show them that you can hear how trust for them has been breached.

I would like to end with a comment that I heard this morning from Father Dennis Tamborello. When Father Tamborello picked us up this morning, he told us that he has a prison ministry. Unbeknown to him when he began this ministry, his predecessor was one of the priests accused of molesting children. As a consequence, the inmates did not trust Father Tamborello. They had not been abused themselves by the priest that he replaced, but their trust in Father Tamborello was shaken by the fact that they had trusted someone who was untrustworthy. Father Tamborello's response to the inmates was, "Well, I'll have to earn your trust."

The Sexual Abuse Crisis: Issues We Still Have to Face

Among the issues we still have to face concerning sexual abuse in the Catholic Church are: How do we know what the truth is when there are sexual abuse allegations; and how do we protect children from such abuse?

The Catholic Church in America is not going to go away. I hope and expect that it will continue as a vibrant force in people's lives, and as a safe haven in all the many ways that

it has the potential to offer. What this means is that we are still going to have children in our churches, and those children are still going to come under the care of our leaders. We need to think urgently about how to protect the children that will come under our care in the future.

We spoke this morning about how difficult it is to recognize abusers. The reality is that it is very difficult to know whether someone is what he seems (Salter, 2003, p.196). I would like to reflect on the implications of that reality as we think about some of the policies articulated in the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" that were discussed by Archbishop Flynn (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002).

I would like to point to two of the articles in which I see embedded profound issues that we still have to face, and to use these issues as a springboard for knowledge and awareness that you may be able to factor into your thinking and actions in the months and years ahead.

Article 2 states that "Dioceses/eparchies will have mechanisms in place to respond promptly to any allegation where there is reason to believe that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred." The issue is, what is "reason to believe?" Who determines that there is "reason to believe"? Let me tell you about a conversation I had at lunch with a priest participating in this conference. He described a situation where two children recently came forward independently with credible allegations about sexual activity with a priest.

The priest is also very credible in his denial of those allegations. This very concerned priest was in a quandary about who was telling the truth.

The reality is that in most situations where allegations of sexual abuse occur, there is also a very high degree of ambiguity. These cases are rarely clear. In order to achieve greater clarity, you need to know about how children disclose, and about how people who abuse children operate. For example, Reverend Donald Cozzens described a colleague, a professor of moral theology, who was determined to have sex with a male teen-age student. This professor had a great cover for his obsessions. He chose an arena in which he was unlikely to be suspect. It is important to recognize that people who abuse children will construct a life, and lead a double life in which they present as nice people (De Becker, 1997). They do good deeds, they say the right things, they are apparently sincere believers, and they may actually be sincere believers. But they are still people who prey on children. They still are a danger to children.

When you are trying to determine which of the conflicting stories, the alleged victim's or the alleged perpetrator's, has the greatest "reason to believe," you must understand that a priest who has the appearance of piety, who demonstrates good deeds reflecting care and concern, who reflects all the qualities that you consider valuable in a priest, may not believe any of it. Or, he may believe some of it, but that does not mean that he's not abusing children. I'm sure we all know of situations where people in the community cannot believe that a particular scoutmaster, teacher, or cleric could have possibly done this to children. But very often being the proverbial pillar of the community is one of the

ways that a person gets away with abuse. It is one of the ways that he gains parents' trust and access to their children, and seduces children unsuspectingly into sexual behavior.

To further complicate judgment, when children disclose sexual abuse, they often disclose in a way that is not very believable or straightforward (Sorenson & Snow, 1991). First, children are often afraid to disclose. Studies of college students and adults reveal that those who had been sexually abused in their childhoods rarely told someone about it (Sauzier, 1989). I don't doubt that children today, with greater education and awareness, are more likely to disclose than were children in the past. Yet even so, there is reason to believe that many abused children still do not disclose. Those who do disclose often wait months or years before telling someone. Why? They don't disclose because they feel that they won't be believed, that it will bring trouble to their families, because they are afraid they or someone else will be harmed if they tell. They may believe that what is happening is their fault; they may be ashamed or feel stigmatized. This is especially the case with boys, who worry particularly about their sexuality and adequacy in the eyes of other children (Black, & De Blassie, 1993; Finkelhor & Brown, 1985).

Children also might not disclose because someone they fear and/or respect has told them that this is a secret. Sometimes children love their abusers, and don't want to get them into trouble or lose the love and attention that person gives to them. Don't forget that people who abuse children are manipulative. They manipulate people around them into believing that they are upstanding citizens, and they manipulate children into these fears

and feelings so that the children will maintain the secrecy of the abuse (Singer, Hussey, & Strom, 1992).

When children do disclose many don't just come out and tell their story (Sorenson & Snow, 1991). Sometimes abuse is revealed directly. Teenagers are more likely to directly tell someone than are younger children. More typically sexual abuse in revealed indirectly or piecemeal. I have conducted a research study that looked at children's disclosures. The abuse of one child in the study was discovered after a playmate reported to her mother that her friend was rubbing the Ken and Barbie dolls together in a way that made the little girl uncomfortable. That child's mother reported this to the abused child's mother, who called protective services after questioning her daughter. The abuser was identified and confessed.

Sexual abuse can also be discovered in other ways. For example, an adult might walk in on a child being abused. A pediatrician might discover that the patient's vaginal complaints are caused by chlamydia. When children do tell, however, they often tell over time, with pieces of their experience emerging over days, weeks, or months. Sometimes children will disclose sexual abuse and then insist that what they said isn't true. Although people may interpret retractions as proof that the abuse didn't happen, it is far more likely for children to retract because they see that people get upset and angry, sometimes at them, that they may not be believed, that it brings trouble to the family, and that it brings pain to the people that love them. The child may feel that he or she has done something wrong, and attempt to undo the damage by insisting that it didn't really

happen, or that only some of it happened, or that it really happened to someone else. In the pain and confusion that accompanies disclosure, a child may yearn to return to the more stable pre-disclosure state, even at the expense of continuing abuse. Significantly, the majority of children who say they were mistaken after they have disclosed sexual abuse eventually reaffirm that they had been abused (Bradley & Woods, 1996; Sorenson & Snow, 1991).

As you can see, the ways children disclose don't always lend themselves intuitively to "reason to believe." Unless you know how children disclose, you are likely to dismiss many of their disclosures as not believable. Sometimes the question you have to ask yourself is, "Why would a child lie to get into trouble?" We know why a perpetrator would lie to get out of trouble. Not infrequently, greater clarity can be achieved in these ambiguous situations when you ask, "Who has the greatest motive to lie?"

Usually the person with the greatest motive to lie is someone who is trying to cover something bad that he or she has done. Children can also lie. In cases of clergy abuse, however, I don't think it's very likely, because I can't think of many motives for a child to lie. As a consequence, I believe that every allegation must be approached as reasonable and appropriately pursued. And, for the good of the child and his family, take the stance that the child is believed, not a skeptical or doubting attitude.

Archbishop Flynn also made reference to Article 5 in the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Within this article is a statement that an allegation of sexual

abuse of a minor by a priest or deacon will initiate "a preliminary investigation, in harmony with canon law." "If this investigation so indicates" further steps will be taken, including reporting the priest or deacon to civil authorities, relieving the alleged offender of his ministerial duties, and possibly requesting medical and psychological evaluation. The unanswered question is, what is "sufficient evidence" to indicate "further steps?" You may never acquire sufficient evidence. Are you going to let that priest continue in his pastoral duties while you gather more evidence, or decide that insufficient evidence is a reason not to take further action? I would argue that in order to protect children, the church and clergy have to be willing to make hard choices, between assuring that children are protected and trusting your brethren.

In the face of a suspicion or allegation of sexual abuse by a priest, one must act. Two principal choices and consequent courses of action may be taken: to choose to believe that the priest could not have abused and that the allegation is false; and to choose to believe that the priest may have abused and that the allegation is credible. Each course of action could be correct, but each choice also contains the possibility that it is incorrect. In the face of ambiguity where a choice must be made, ask yourself, which is the more tolerable error. Is the more tolerable error to respond as though the priest has not abused, when in fact he has, with the risk that a child or children may continue to be molested? Or is the more tolerable error to respond as though the priest may have abused, with the risk that an innocent man will suffer emotionally and professionally from that misjudgment.

The consequences of both errors are profound. Some situations are clearer than others and carry less risk of error. Other situations, perhaps most, are highly ambiguous and the risk of error is high. Under these circumstances, I would argue that the second error is the more tolerable. The costs to children both of continued abuse and of not being believed and protected are catastrophic. The costs to priests of being falsely accused are also high, but they are not children. They have greater resources and resiliency with which to understand and to recover from that blow.

It is also important to remember that these are preliminary rather than permanent decisions. Once the church accepts that an allegation must be acted upon, according to Article 4, the case is referred to the civil authorities. I believe that if priests are trained to understand the difficult choices that must be made, and why allegations much be presumed credible in ambiguous situations, they will be able to accept the sacrifices an innocently accused priest must bear for the good of the community and the greater protection of children.

Now I'd like to talk about what we can do to protect the children that are with us now and in the future. As parents, we can protect our children by being present at activities where they might have contact with adults. Go to their soccer games. Go on the overnights, be the chaperone at the dance, because you don't know where there might be danger for your children. You want to be present, you or someone else that you trust. For example, parents may take turns at their own and each other's children's activities (Salter, 2003, pp. 223-226).

Institutions such as Boy Scouts of America have comprehensive policies for protecting children (Boy Scouts of America, 2001). Boy Scouts is a high-risk environment, just as a church is a high-risk environment, and their policies include screening practices for leadership selection, youth protection training for all leaders and volunteers, sexual abuse prevention education for their scouts, and the requirement that no scout leader can be alone with a child. These policies protect not only children, but also those who work with children. Such a careful and comprehensive policy is important for the church as well. You have to assume that anyone with access to children, along with the potential for privacy and secrecy, can prey on children. Don't allow the privacy. Don't provide the opportunities. If parents are involved routinely in activities that include children, both the children and the church will be better protected (Salter, ibid.).

To conclude, I would like to raise a different issue. As we have discussed, predators can be very deceptive. One of the issues I didn't discuss is how difficult it is to detect deception. Studies of deception reveal that no one is very good at knowing when somebody is lying. When people are practiced liars they can fool just about everybody, because that's their job. They are good at it and they are successful, or they wouldn't be able to abuse children. The most skilled detectors, such as secret service agents and police, under the best of circumstances correctly detect deception about sixty percent of the time. For the rest of us the rate is random. In other words, we correctly detect deception about fifty percent of the time. And people who think they are really good at

knowing when someone is lying aren't any better than anyone else, they are just more insistent (Salter, 2003, p. 196).

Predators are deceptive. They are alluring. They can be kind and considerate. They may be pious. They may go out of their way to do good deeds. They flatter and seduce. Just as predators can lure you into believing that they are good priests, predators can also lure women into marriages where they and their children are abused. One of the tasks of professionals that work with these women is to help them get out of dangerous relationships safely.

The church and its priests are also acknowledged to be in a marriage. One might argue that, through their cleverness and allure, some predatory priests have seduced the church into that marriage. In response to your own crisis, the Dallas Charter recognizes that some priests may need to be severed from the clerical state. In other words, the Dallas Charter authorizes the divorce of a priest not only from priestly duties, but also sometimes from the priesthood itself, in the service of protecting children and of protecting the church.

I would urge you to think about the meaning of divorce. If the church can contain people who have misled them and harmed their own, so in marriages women can be misled and they and their children harmed. If severing a priest's sacramental ties to the church is permissible when he has committed such grievous betrayal and harm, so too should such

severing of marriage be permissible. Under these circumstances, a woman needs and deserves the support and comfort of her church.

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