

Predatory Priests: Sexually Abusing Fathers*

* Studies in Gender and Sexuality (2001) vol 5, no. 1:31-56

Portions of this paper have appeared in other forms elsewhere (Gartner, 1999a, 1999b, 2002)

Abstract

The media, the public, and the Church have spotlighted the effects of the scandals on the Church rather than the effects of priest abuse on its victims. Child sexual abuse has ominous relational implications for its victims. It often results in distrust of authority; seeing relationships in hierarchical, exploitative terms; distance and isolation; and fear of relating. Dissociation, an adaptive response to trauma, can become a characteristic, dysfunctional response to stress. Boys often have particular problems because of socialized masculine-gender norms that men are not victims and concerns about the implications of same-sex abuse for their sexual orientation. To these aftereffects, sexual abuse by a priest adds betrayal of spirituality, unconscious feelings that incest has occurred, and a crisis of faith arising from a sense that one has betrayed God. Examples from film, clinical practice, and an interview with a mental health professional sexually abused as a boy illustrate these points.

The controversy surrounding the 2002 scandals over the abuse of children by priests has churned throughout our culture and at times boiled over into bitterness,

rancor, and vindictiveness. Throughout this period, the media and the public, like the Church itself, has paid far more attention to the effects of the scandals on the Church than to the effects of the abuse on its victims.

While there have been some reports of abuse of girls by priests, the largest number of cases have involved boys. In this paper, I track the effects of sexual abuse on boys, with particular attention to the specific aftereffects of abuse by priests.

The Boys of St. Vincent

The Boys of St. Vincent (1994) is a two-part film depicting long-term, brutal sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of boys in a Catholic orphanage. I urge any reader who wants to understand what happens to boys who have been abused by priests to see this movie. Based on true events in a Newfoundland Catholic home for boys, it addresses diverse themes related to the sexual abuse of boys and conveys the complexity of the boys' reactions to it. The filmmakers captured the most salient issues related to the sexual abuse of boys and its aftermath, and I consider the movie to be a paradigm for what happens when boys are sexually abused by priests.

In Part I, we see the boys' abuse in horrifyingly graphic detail. Brother Lavin, the Superintendent of the Home, is spellbinding and charismatic, but terrifying. He frequently summons Kevin, his "special boy," to his office. There, he holds, caresses, kisses, and otherwise molests Kevin while murmuring how much he loves him. But if Kevin displeases him, Brother Lavin explodes in physically abusive rage. Following a particularly merciless beating after he tries to run away, Kevin is broken. He becomes far more careful about his protests; he is more depressed, less lively, and more guarded

and suspicious.

Other boys at the orphanage are also abused by the brothers. In particular, we see Steven as he is visited and molested at night. Steven's older brother, Brian, learns that these molestations are happening "again," and he protests loudly but is punished with ten belt lashes on each hand.

The brand of Catholicism taught at St. Vincent demands unswerving loyalty to the orphanage and obedience to orders from authority figures. There is an explicit message that those who do not obey will go to hell -- this threat includes boys who try not to acquiesce to their abuse. The situation is particularly calamitous because the boys are orphans with nowhere else to go.

Political overtones are suggested. High Church officials will not stand for any besmirching of the orphanage's name. Their power to influence lay authorities is chillingly conveyed in scenes with politicians, police, and the Church's own social worker, who is not allowed to see the boys.

When the boys' abuse is reported to the police, an investigation commences. The boys' stories are alternately conveyed by flat recitations by the boys in the police station and brief, viscerally evocative flashbacks to the abuse they are describing. Unlike the other boys, Steven denies he has been abused, showing a bravado and empty showmanship that superficially protects him from experiencing the effects of his trauma. Kevin describes his abuse and is assured by the authorities that the abuse will stop.

But instead the investigation is stopped. The boys' statements are called "pornographic" and are rewritten so that criminal investigations will not proceed. The brothers involved are placed elsewhere, where they will be "counseled." The chief

detective makes a pointed observation that the boys are not being offered counseling, but he is silenced. Before being removed, Brother Lavin allows Brian to leave the orphanage, He warns him, though, that if he tells anyone what he knows, his younger brother will pay the consequences. The offending brothers are replaced by men equally vicious and oppressive, and in a brief scene at the end of Part I we see one of them molesting a boy.

Part II takes place fifteen years later. We follow the stories of Kevin, Steven, Brian, and Peter Lavin, no longer a member of his order but now a husband and father living in Montreal. The now-retired chief detective brings criminal charges against Lavin based on the boys' fifteen-year-old affidavits.

Kevin, inarticulate, isolated, and enraged that he is being subpoenaed to testify, says he will not appear in court. Steven is brought in to testify from Toronto, where he is a cocaine addict living on welfare. He is reunited for the first time with his brother Brian, now married and a father. Steven dismisses the idea that he is hurt that Brian never found him again after leaving the orphanage, but underneath his old bravado he is deeply wounded by his brother's failure to rescue him.

We witness several legal investigations simultaneously in crosscut: Lavin's trial, the trial of the brother who molested Steven, and the administrative investigation into the coverup of the boys' testimony. Steven is ambushed on the witness stand by a defense lawyer, and is revealed to be an occasional male prostitute who himself abused younger boys in the years before he left St. Vincent. Shattered, he dies of an overdose of drugs just as his abuser is convicted.

Kevin is initially stonily silent about his abuse and prone to erupt in fury if pressed to talk about it. He will not meet with Steven, but when Steven dies Kevin is

devastated. Attending the funeral, he decides to appear in court to testify against Lavin.

Meanwhile, Lavin's seemingly happy family life is shattered when he is arrested at home. His wife, at first supportive of him, gradually begins to doubt him, decides to stand by him anyway, then turns away from him forever when she realizes the full extent of his crimes.

Imperious, self-righteous, and arrogant, Lavin maintains that the boys are lying ingrates, but in extraordinary scenes with a psychiatrist, his inner life is conveyed. He talks of his own early abuse and abandonment before going to St. Vincent himself at age nine. He then reveals the fear of sex and love that led him to join a religious brotherhood. When he talks about how much he loved Kevin, he breaks down, sobbing.

In the final scenes of the movie, Kevin appears on the stand and in a whisper confirms the abuse he described fifteen years earlier. Intercut are scenes of Kevin's first molestation. In an initially joyful swimming pool sequence, we see how Lavin turned a lonely boy's Easter without visitors into a glorious event by taking him swimming. We then see how this marvelous moment veered into violation. Kevin remembers this trauma along with flashes of later molestations and brutal beatings.

In the final scene, Lavin, convicted and alone, repeatedly pounds a table, much as he raged in the first part of the film. Then he looks away again, cupping his face as the film ends.

The Boys of St. Vincent is a harrowing film that tellingly reveals both the facts of the boys' sexual victimizations and its later impact on them. We repeatedly see the callousness and denial of institutions in relation to sexual abuse, and the inability even

of those adults who believe abuse has taken place to stop it.¹

Although filmed in 1994, and based on events that took place well before that time, The Boys of St. Vincent is a remarkably prescient and compelling description of events very similar to those that made headlines in 2002. We see in the movie how the Church protected itself by silencing the investigation and by transferring priests to other posts rather than removing them from the priesthood. We see how the anguish of the boys is not really considered as the Church preserves itself. And we see how victims are disbelieved and blamed in this horrendous situation.

Effects of Boyhood Sexual Abuse

When we see the boys in The Boys of St. Vincent as adults, one or another of them reveals common aftereffects of boyhood sexual trauma: dissociation, isolation, addiction, prostitution, ragefulness, suicidality, denial, and the possibility of becoming abusive himself. Looking at these and other aftermaths to boyhood sexual victimization conveys its consequences. I have elsewhere (Gartner, 1996, 1997a, b, 1999a, c, d; see also Lew, 1988; Hunter, 1990; and Holmes and Slap, 1998) described these aftereffects at length, but I will review them now.

Sexual abuse is an interpersonal experience that has ominous implications for a boy's future frame of reference in all interpersonal relationships. When a child is betrayed in this way, seemingly unbreakable bonds are broken (Cheselka, 1996). The

1

Ironically, this denial was repeated when the film was finished: Originally made for Canadian television, it was not allowed to be broadcast in Canada because it was thought that it might influence a trial in which abuse was alleged to have occurred under similar circumstances. Not only was the broadcast stopped, but, on petition from the Church, the media were forbidden to report either the ban or the reasons for the court decision (Henton and McCann, 1995). Eventually, the movie got a limited run in theaters in the United States and was broadcast on television. It is now available on video.

abuser uses a power relationship to satisfy his or her own needs without regard to the needs of the victim. When the abuser is in some way the boy's caretaker, someone whom the boy has believed he could count on implicitly, "treachery is introduced into the most private, personal, and trusting relationships" (Gartner, 1999a, p. 13).

During childhood molestation, dissociation is an effective means victims employ to defend against psychic disintegration (Putnam, 1989, 1992; Davies and Frawley, 1992, 1994; Bromberg, 1998). Men with sexual-abuse histories frequently recount that during their abuse they "felt like a boy on the ceiling watching another little boy being abused." We see this in The Boys of St. Vincent when Kevin's hands and body go limp after he has been beaten by Brother Lavin. A self-induced hypnotic state partially protects him from his disorientation and pain. Afterward, his blank eyes and withdrawn state reflect how his dissociation takes over even when he is not being abused.

As with women, dissociation may become the prime means a sexually abused man develops for dealing with anxiety. After chronic abuse, dissociation often become a victim's chief way of dealing with all kinds of uncomfortable situations. However, it is no longer functional. What started out as a useful, perhaps even lifesaving, way of dealing with trauma ends up as a principal mode of being in the world.

But dissociation may or may not be an appropriate reaction to every anxiety-arousing stimulus. The dissociative "cure" for anxiety can itself become the problem (Bromberg, 1994). For example, a sexually abused man may develop compulsive behaviors, like substance abuse, incessant masturbation, or anonymous, unpleasurable sexual activity, that are his means of hypnotizing himself and returning to a dissociated state. There is an example of this in The Boys of St. Vincent when Steven becomes a drug addict and prostitute. These behaviors offer him him a speedy reentry to the

protected dissociated state he created while being abused as a boy.

Interpersonally, these boys often grow up distrusting power and authority. Their ability to form attachments to authorities is severely compromised because they have internalized people in power as untrustworthy, malevolent, and undependable.

But the interpersonal effects go beyond relationships with authority figures. Feeling that all relationships include a power differential, a sexually abused man may have a constant need to control them all. He cannot understand the concept of equal partnership, which bodes ill for his intimate love relationships in adulthood. Power becomes eroticized, which, of course, also has implications for a man's sexual and love relationships. Phobic about emotional attachment, a man with a boyhood sexual abuse history often maintains an interpersonal distance in relationships. This may alternate with a sense of merging with a loved one so that he hardly knows where he ends and the other begins.

There is a depiction in The Boys of St. Vincent of why a sexually abused man needs interpersonal distance and how he achieves it. Kevin grows up leading an isolated, frozen life, but this swiftly breaks down if he gets close to others. Stonily silent about his abuse, he is prone to erupt in fury if pressed to talk about it. He builds himself a house in a lonely country area and spends his time installing insulation there, perhaps a symbolic representation of the isolation and insulation he needs to survive. But this attempt to distance himself from others and from his own feelings falls apart easily. At one point, we see him physically attack another former St. Vincent orphan who reminds him that he was Lavin's "special boy." Then he stops seeing his girlfriend when she becomes too curious about his history.

Confused about what is affection and what is abuse, what is desire and what is

tenderness (Ferenczi, 1933), a man with a sexual-abuse history may have great difficulty differentiating among sex, love, nurturance, affection, and abuse.

Interpersonal approaches from others that are simply friendly maybe be experienced as seductive and exploitative. Conversely, he may not notice when exploitative demands are being made on him, for he has learned to accept such demands as usual in his interpersonal world.

He may at times be phobic about sex and feel smothered by its forced intimacy. As one man said to me, only half-joking, "The trouble with sex is there's always someone in your face." He is likely to feel isolated from and during interpersonal sex. In addition, he may feel ambivalent about sexual pleasure, since a certain amount of physical pleasure may have accompanied the traumatic abuse. As another man put it, "All pleasure is bad. It's bad that my father touches my penis. His touching my penis gives me pleasure. Therefore, pleasure is bad."

On the other hand, interpersonal relatedness may become eroticized because sex is the only way for the man to feel intimate (or seemingly intimate.

Hungry for interpersonal contact but phobic about it, believing that sexual closeness is his chief opportunity to feel loved but experiencing love as abuse, a sexually abused man who allows himself to be sexual at all often solves his dilemma by engaging in frequent, indiscriminate, and dissociated sexual encounters [Gartner, 1999a, pp. 202-203].

Compulsive sexuality strengthens the dissociation that sexually abused men need to deal with anxiety. It soothes momentarily, just as there is relief through alcohol or such other compulsive behavior as gambling, eating, drug taking, shopping, and, in less obviously destructive ways, compulsive working and exercising. In addition, though, compulsive sex recreates the sexual-abuse situation where dissociation first developed and therefore is a particularly effective way to summon up the trance states achieved during dissociation.

These sexually compulsive acts are not free or joyous expressions of erotic, passionate sensuality. Rather, they demonstrate a man's imprisonment in an empty behavioral circuit from which he feels there is no exit. Although he pursues sex incessantly, he achieves little intimacy. He desires love but "he does not feel loved once the sex act is concluded. These incidents leave him feeling empty and lonely, while the idea of fully pursuing interpersonal relatedness fills him with a dread of repeating his abuse history" (Gartner, 1999a, p. 203).

An abused child learns that sexuality and seduction constitute his interpersonal currency, his chief means of getting what he needs in life. Having learned that his sexuality is valuable to others, he may allow sexuality to permeate all his interpersonal encounters. Such a person is seductive in diverse relationships, often inappropriately so.

Another aftermath of boyhood sexual victimization is that relatedness, including sexual relationships, may become exploitative, even sadistic or masochistic. In some cases, the boy himself becomes sexually abusive, as happens with Brother Lavin in The Boys of St. Vincent, who was abused as a child and later becomes the chief victimizer at the orphanage. We also hear that Steven abused some younger boys while at the

orphanage. It is a commonly believed myth that this is the usual pattern, that sexually abused boys almost inevitably become sexually abusive men. In fact, though, while it is true that about four out of five male abusers were themselves abused as boys, there is evidence that only about one in five sexually abused boys goes on to become an abuser (Lisak, Hopper, and Song, 1996). Because of this myth, however, many men fear that they will become abusive or worry that others will think they are abusers should they disclose their history.

Underlying all these issues are two major ones that differentiate sexually abused boys from sexually abused girls. Both issues complicate boys' capacities to come to terms with sexual abuse.

First, socialized masculine gender roles dictate that boys and men are not victims and that they may express rage but not the "softer" emotions. The terrifying fury of Brother Lavin in The Boys of St. Vincent typifies the emotional reactions to abuse that are allowed men by these gender norms. This rage may be turned inward, as when in The Boys of St. Vincent a despairing Steven eventually kills himself with a drug overdose, perhaps with conscious intent.

Masculine-gender norms also dictate that men are competitive, resilient, self-reliant, independent, and certainly not emotionally needy (Pleck, 1981, 1995; Brod and Kaufman, 1994; Levant, 1995; Levant and Pollack, 1995; Lisak, 1995; Pollack, 1995, 1998). Again, Brother Lavin's denial of his own neediness as a child, and indeed of the abuse he has inflicted on Kevin, epitomizes how sexually abused men deny their reality in the service of maintaining these norms. Likewise, Steven asserted as a child that he was not abused; he thus superficially protected himself from his trauma. As an adult, Steven similarly denies that he was hurt by his brother's failure to rescue him from the

orphanage.

In addition, “real” men are thought to want sex whenever it is offered, especially by women, and to be the initiators of sexual activity. For many men, these qualities define masculinity. Their masculine identity is at stake if they are identified as victims because victimhood is identified with being female.

These masculine-gender norms, pernicious for many reasons, are especially likely to interfere with a man’s ability to process being sexually victimized. Because of them, many men believe, consciously or unconsciously, that only sissies and weaklings allow abuse: victims can only be women or feminized men (often seen as gay). Being victimized means being “not male,” as does any acquiescence to victimization. Therefore, men often cannot acknowledge to themselves that they were sexually victimized, nor can they easily allow themselves to say that they were traumatized and emotionally devastated by a sexual encounter (especially with a woman) without giving up some sense of manhood.

In addition, masculine-gender norms make it difficult for men to develop or use the psychological resources necessary for them to recover from their trauma. Unable to be emotionally needy or to process emotional trauma, they are likely to have counterphobic reactions to feeling feminized by abuse. They become aggressive or “hypermasculine.” If they thus become action oriented rather than self-reflective, they are most likely to become abusive themselves, as happens with Brother Lavin and, to a lesser extent, Steven in The Boys of St. Vincent .

A second major factor also differentiates boys from girls as they process sexual victimization. When the abuser is male (and even sometimes when she is female), many boys and men -- whether straight or gay -- have fears and concerns regarding

their sexual orientation. Conventional wisdom dictates that a sexually abused boy is likely to become gay, although in fact there is no persuasive evidence that premature sexual activity with either men or women fundamentally changes a boy's sexual orientation.

Nevertheless, a boy who was headed toward being straight before his abuse is likely to doubt himself, wondering why he was chosen by a man as a sexual object. A boy headed toward being gay may feel prematurely rushed into defining himself as gay, or may hate his homosexuality because of a belief that it was caused by his abuse experience. Even boys who say that their early experiences were not traumatic were introduced to sex in a way that involved an exploitation of a less powerful person by a more powerful one. Whether the boys are gay or straight, this exploitative introduction to sexuality has implications for how they proceed as men in intimate relationships.

Sexual Abuse by Priests

Consider the effect on children of abuse by priests. Priests certainly have no monopoly on being sexual predators. I have known sexual victims who were abused by family members of all kinds, teachers, coaches, scoutmasters, babysitters, neighbors, or doctors, not to mention non-Catholic clergy.

Yet there seem to be specific meanings for victims in having been abused by priests. There is a concerted effort, usually a benign one, to make Catholic clergy part of a parishioner's "family." Catholic children are told to call clergy Father, Mother, Sister, Brother. Children, of course, are often quite literal in their understanding of such adult ideas.

And, a priest is not simply “a” father. He is a direct representative of “the” Father, a living re-presentation of Christ. I have heard of one child, a girl, who was told by her priest/abuser that to resist her molestation would be a direct defiance of God’s wishes.

If they have been encouraged to consider clergy as part of their family, indeed, as special family members who have an immediate link to God, how are children to understand when their Father, Mother, Sister, or Brother makes sexual overtures to them? Their most sacrosanct family member has betrayed them in a fundamental way. The more they believe in a link to God through a priest, the more horrific the betrayal. And the more they believe in the familial implications of calling someone Father, Mother, Sister, or Brother, the more incestuous are the acts committed during sexual abuse. Psychologically, then, many victims of priests are dealing with incest.

If a child is abused by a priest, he may not simply have a crisis of faith. He may literally feel that he is betraying God. He knows that his abuser has taken a vow of chastity. Even if he is sure that he never desired the priest sexually, he may still feel that he somehow instigated things and tempted the priest to break those vows. He is particularly likely to think so if his abuser tells him that they are engaging in sexual behavior because the boy is special or beautiful. Whatever the adult’s intent in saying such a thing, the boy may well conclude that the abuse was his own fault.

As a man discerns that he was exploited by someone he had considered a direct link to God, his whole spiritual world may begin to crumble. Boys who are most easily preyed upon by priests are likely to come from families with deep religious convictions. They may be altar boys or choir boys, and in any case they are likely to feel engaged in their religious lives and to have idealized views of their spiritual mentors. In addition, they may come from troubled families and be looking for parental figures in the Church

to act as role models and provide the structure that they lack.

With all this in mind, consider the cases of men who were sexually abused as boys by priests. I have elsewhere (Gartner, 1999a) discussed two such men, both of whom are still in treatment as of this writing. The circumstances of their abuse were different: Julian was abused by a priest/mentor from ages twelve until fifteen. Lorenzo had been abused by a number of men before a sexual encounter with a priest at age fifteen.

Lorenzo and Julian

Lorenzo and Julian grew up more similar to than different from other men I have known with histories of boyhood sexual abuse. They both came from large families in which tenderness was almost unknown and violence was the norm. Thus they were both starved for affection and guidance and looked to priests to provide for those needs. But those needs also made them easy prey for the priests they idealized.

Following their abuse, they both became sexually compulsive, and each had vast reserves of rage and problems with older authorities. They both had problematic intimate relationships. Lorenzo, a gay man, had never had a relationship of any depth. Julian, a married straight man, found ongoing intimacy with his wife nearly impossible to achieve. But, poignantly, both Lorenzo and Julian had crises of faith superimposed on the more usual damaging sequelae of childhood sexual abuse:

By the time he was fifteen, Lorenzo had had numerous exploitative and callous sexual encounters in which he sexually serviced older boys and men, all of whom were publicly identified as heterosexual and many of whom were married. Confused about

the meaning of his own behavior and only vaguely knowledgeable about sexual orientation, he began to wonder if he were gay. He had no one to whom he could talk about this in the working-class mill town in which he grew up. One of ten children in a lower middle-class Catholic home where physical abuse was rampant, he knew better than to discuss gay sex at home. But he began to feel desperate about his sexual feelings. Then he remembered a priest who had once served in his town for two years before being transferred to a large city 300 miles away. He had always thought this priest was “cool,” and so he called him and said he needed to talk to him. The priest came to Lorenzo’s town for a visit, and Lorenzo first told him about his abuse experiences and then said he thought he was gay.

“He looked at me and said, ‘I knew you were gay the minute I laid eyes on you!’ I said, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ and he said, ‘Some things are better to discover on your own.’ So, at first he was good about it -- he invited me to visit him, and when I did he took me around the city and showed me gay neighborhoods, gay bars, gay shops. That part was good, but then we went back to the house he lived in with other priests, and I wanted to get high -- I was a crazy kid in those days, and I asked him where to get grass. He said, ‘No problem, just go upstairs and ask Father Donald.’ So I went upstairs, and there was nice Father Donald, and we got high together, and then he made a pass at me.” Lorenzo laughed. “It was the first time anyone serviced me, and I really liked it. When I went downstairs and told the first priest about it, he said, ‘Oh, sure, Father Donald does that with everyone.’ Can you believe this? He knew what was going to happen when he sent me up there! Later, I found out he was gay too and had sex with other boys, though never with me.”

Lorenzo was talking faster and faster, and I asked him to slow down and tell me

what he felt about all this. "I thought it was funny. And exciting." Then he paused. "But, you know, I'm thirty-five now, about the age Father Donald was then. I have no interest in fifteen-year-olds! My nephews are that age! I'd never go near them for sex." I asked again how he felt about what happened with the two priests. For the first time, he seemed reflective. "It was a terrible thing to do. They knew how fucked up I was about sex with all those men and how unsure I was about being gay. I went to them for sanctuary! And they just helped me party with them." Lorenzo began to look sad. "In those days I really believed in the Catholic Church. No more."

Julian was deeply ambivalent about the man who simultaneously mentored, loved, and abused him. From the time he was twelve, Julian was abused for three years by Father Scott, a parish priest who required that he come for special counseling sessions in order to get confirmed. Father Scott made Julian his special altar boy, invited him to visit him in his rooms, and undertook to educate him in classical texts, languages, and music. Julian came from a psychologically and physically invasive large family in which emotions and boundaries were ignored. Although he flunked out of school after Father Scott began to abuse him, once the abuse stopped he became an A student, largely, he believes, because of the earlier influence of the priest. He entered seminary himself but fell apart after two years and dropped out. He eventually went on to get an advanced degree in another field.

Father Scott taught Julian to idealize the male relationships described in ancient Greek texts. These idyllic relationships included intellectual mentoring, deep commitment, and interpersonal intimacy, as well as physical sexuality, which began a few months after Father Scott started counseling Julian. Father Scott led up to the initial "seduction" by encouraging Julian to talk about the pain he felt about his

physically abusive but otherwise unresponsive family. After these sessions, the priest would hug Julian. These hugs were precious to the boy, who was starved for physical affection and, indeed, any kind of positive regard from an adult.

With time, the hugs got longer, and then one day Father Scott kissed Julian. He put his tongue in the boy's mouth and made the kiss last for minutes. Julian was startled and confused, unsure of what was happening and what it meant. After the kiss, Father Scott said, "I know you want more, but that's all for now." Julian was bewildered at the time, but when he reached adulthood he said, "So, right from the beginning he made it that the abuse was my idea, so I felt guilty that it was happening even though I had no concept of men kissing at the time, and certainly no interest in it." Shortly thereafter, the priest introduced Julian to anal sex, and for two years they had regular sexual encounters that included anal sex and mutual masturbation. On a few occasions the sex included an older boy whom Father Scott was also abusing.

The priest said that their relationship existed on the highest plane possible for two human beings, that they had attained the ideal glorified by the greatest poets of the ancient world. He reiterated that they experienced all forms of love together: love of beauty, love of thought, love of logic, love of art, and love of one another that was intellectual, sensual, and emotional. Julian did love Father Scott, and he craved the companionship and deep interest the priest offered him. Nevertheless, he was confused and conflicted about the sex that accompanied that interest. "He did so much for me! Anyone would think he was the best mentor a boy could ever have, and, except for the sex, he was."

Julian put a stop to the sex when he was fifteen. After he left for college, his family moved away from the diocese where Father Scott served, and Julian seldom

returned to his old neighborhood. He excelled in school and entered a seminary to become a priest, but dropped out when he realized that this path was somehow an outgrowth of his relationship with the priest. He married, but remained ashamed, conflicted, and secretive about his abuse. He continued to be grateful for the intellectual and emotional expansion the relationship with Father Scott had afforded him. At the same time, however, he was covertly furious about the exploitation and mystification involved in their sexual activity. As an adult, he was a compulsive masturbator driven furtively to view peep shows and consumed by female pornography when he was anxious. When he began treatment, he felt out of control, in the grip of the sexual impulses that flooded him at these times.

In their treatments, both Julian and Lorenzo became increasingly aware of the extent of their rage at their priest/abusers. But they also realized, sadly, how much they still hoped for from these inadequate men. Lorenzo phoned the priest who had originally sent him to the abusing priest. He found this priest receptive to the call until he realized that Lorenzo wanted to talk to him about how much he had been hurt by his boyhood abuse. The priest then abruptly terminated the conversation. He never returned other phone calls. Nor did he respond to a letter in which Lorenzo told him that he was simply interested in coming to some understanding of what had happened, not in hurting him.

At age thirty, Julian attended a funeral in his old neighborhood and there saw Father Scott, who came over and introduced himself to Julian's wife. Julian felt furious but paralyzed, wanting to shame and hurt the priest but barely able to speak to him. The priest drew him into a corner and whispered, "You may feel better than the rest of us now that you've left town, but you and I know that all I have to do is rub your belly

and you'll squeal like a puppy!" Feeling helpless and shamed once again, Julian finally got in touch with the full extent of his rage at his former mentor. Yet he was never able to confront Father Scott and maintained a fantasy of reconciling with him.

When the priest died suddenly a few years later, Julian attended his funeral. There, a number of people offered their condolences to him as Father Scott's former protege. He was told that the priest had often praised Julian and had been very proud of him. While in some ways it was gratifying to hear this, Julian also felt inchoate rage. When he learned that he had been left a small sum of money in Father Scott's will, he experienced the bequest as a way of buying him off, even making him a prostitute. At that point he talked to the other boy who had participated at times in his abuse. This man, himself now a priest, was the executor of Father Scott's estate. Julian did get some corroboration from him of his former mentor's predatory nature but remained deeply conflicted about Father Scott and the effect of their relationship on him.

I believe that many of the suits against the Church in 2002 were brought by men who, like Lorenzo, initially sought some kind of pastoral experience that would heal them. When met with silence or denial, they eventually chose legal means to get acknowledgment of the wrong that had been done to them.

Both Lorenzo and Julian had entertained thoughts of legal redress long before the Church scandals became public in 2002. Lorenzo focused more on his earlier abusers, the men who had molested him before he ever spoke to the priest about his worries. He went so far as to have an interview with a prosecutor to warn him that these men were still possible predators. In contrast to his feelings about these earlier abusers, he was more ambivalent about both the priest who had molested him and the one who led him into that abusive situation. He was more concerned about protecting

other boys than about getting recompense or justice for himself. He considered writing the diocese where these priests were now serving, again to warn them of the danger the men might still pose. But his mixed feelings about the priests and the Church stopped him from doing so. He reasoned that the Church was unlikely to do anything about the situation. This conclusion was, of course, later confirmed by the many stories made public about abusive priests who were transferred by Church authorities from one parish or diocese to another. Eventually, Lorenzo decided that to write to Church authorities would only give new life to the devastating conflicts that had been largely worked through in his lengthy analysis.

Julian considered suing to have his analysis paid for by either the Church or the estate of his now-deceased abuser. He felt that such a demand would be justified but decided that entering into a lengthy legal battle would do him more harm than good. He concluded that to start such a suit would keep him stuck in his anger and in his memories for at least the five or six years it would take to pursue such a court case. He also recognized that a legal battle would risk his having to reexperience the psychological fragmentation he had felt before he began treatment and that there was no guarantee that he would gain anything at all from the process.

Both Lorenzo and Julian, then, recognized that the Church would not offer either justice or solace. This surmise, of course, has turned out to be, for the most part, confirmed by the Church's responses to the victims who have come to the Church for either pastoral or legal redress. Therefore, Julian and Lorenzo seem to have been correct in assessing that their most fruitful path would be to mourn their childhood and innocence, and that this was better accomplished in the consulting room than in the court room.

When the Church scandal broke, Julian and Lorenzo experienced a liberating sense of having their torment validated. They were very glad that the Church was being forced to acknowledge the extent of priest abuse. At the same time, however, they felt a recurrence of shame. Furthermore, they were conflicted about not having come forward as other victims had, a conflict that was constantly triggered by news reports about the Church. Lorenzo said that he had to monitor tightly what he allowed himself to read or hear in the media in order to keep himself from being overwhelmed by anxiety. And Julian noted sadly that he was a religious man without a church: “I went to seminary because Catholicism means something to me. But now I can’t go into a church without feeling I will vomit. My wife says, ‘Let’s go to an Episcopalian Church -- it’s almost the same!’ But it’s not the same. I’m not an Episcopalian, I’m a Catholic. And there’s nowhere I can go to be one.”

Dr. X

The theme of religious betrayal overlaying betrayal by a trusted adult was underlined for me by a third man who spoke to me about his abuse by a priest. Dr. X₂ is a mental health professional, married and now in his 50s, who has had personal therapy for over twenty years and who has treated numerous male victims of sexual abuse. He has in many ways successfully dealt with his boyhood trauma. But he is left with a cold fury at the Church and all it stands for, as well as a bleak contempt for organized religion.

Dr. X was raised in a rural area of the American heartland, the son of a devout

2

I am indebted to Dr. X for his willingness to speak so frankly to me about his painful history and permit me to write about him.

Catholic mother and a less religious father who nevertheless “went along with the program.” A pious child who always wanted to please his mother, Dr. X was a very literal believer in Church doctrine. He absolutely believed that a priest was God’s representative on earth.

Of his mother, he says, “To her dying day she was a praying, God-fearing woman. She was the ultimate Catholic, and she wanted me to be one, too.” He paints a mixed picture of his father: unpredictable, a workaholic, sometimes dangerous, demeaning, and physically abusive, at other times strong, capable, and “centering.” Dr. X says his sense of self-esteem and goodness came not from his parents but from two men close to his family. One was a friend of his father’s who stayed with the family occasionally and seems to have been a near-ideal role model. The other was the family’s parish priest.

The priest came from New York and was viewed by Dr. X and his parents as worldly and wise. He visited the family frequently and often stayed the night, even though he lived only three blocks away. On these occasions, he slept on a couch outside Dr. X’s room. On many occasions, starting when Dr. X was five years old, the priest would take the boy out of his bed and bring him into his own, where he placed the boy on top of himself. Dr. X could feel the priest’s erection through the sheet that separated them. The priest moved under him or the priest would maneuver him, pressing the boy’s moving body against his erection until the priest reached orgasm. He would also fondle Dr. X’s genitals, sometimes with an ice cube. As far as Dr. X can recall, there was never any oral or anal contact. He notes, however, that his memory is cloudy and has numerous gaps in relation to the priest’s actions.

After a few years, the priest moved to another parish in the same state. He

would visit the family every few months and take Dr. X away for the weekend. At these times they went to a suburban house that Dr. X believed at the time was where the priest lived with other priests. He now believes it was a house that the priests kept for their encounters with young boys, since all the other priests also brought boys with them on these weekends. There were many incidents that Dr. X remembers only vaguely. He recalls one in particular from within his dissociated state at the time. Watching himself from above, he sees himself step out of the shower while the priest squats down and rubs shaving cream all over his genitals, then “lovingly” wipes it off. Dr. X’s younger brother came on at least one of these weekend trips, and the brother recalls clinging to a maid as the other priests tried to get him to accompany them as they took their own boys into the bathroom to watch Dr. X being fondled.

These incidents continued until Dr. X was fifteen years old. “As I grew older, the guilt intensified. I sensed that things were off, but I felt it was only me, that I was not able to exercise self-control. I didn’t want him to take me with him anymore and grew increasingly wary of his visits. I dreaded them but felt obliged to be ‘good’ -- a good Catholic, a good, compliant boy in both his eyes and my parents’. I could not disappoint him.”

When he was in his late teens, Dr. X’s mother told him that there were rumors about the priest being sexually involved with children. “I became enraged. I’d thought I was special to him. I told her what he’d done to me, but, amazingly, she stayed in touch with him, and so did I! I didn’t truly realize that I’d been abused. It was just something that happened.”

When Dr. X moved to New York as a young adult, the priest lived there, having left the priesthood. For a while, Dr. X stayed with him. The priest tried to seduce him

again “for old times sake,” but Dr. X fended him off. A year later, he began therapy and started to identify his experience as abusive. He decided to confront the priest, and, taking a “huge friend” along for protection, went to see him. “I told him, ‘You abused me,’ but he said, ‘What I did was just love. It was good for you.’ He never acknowledged any wrongdoing.”

Trying to gauge the extent of his trauma, Dr. X exclaimed, “I felt so betrayed! It went on for ten years, a person who seemed to love me and whom I loved. That reduces the trauma, I suppose, but ten years adds up to a lot of trauma in itself.” He noted that only after twenty-odd years of therapy was he aware of how enraged he has been all his life. He had always known about his anger toward his father, and even his mother, a seemingly more passive figure. “My rage was always under the surface, and I knew that. But there was more, and I knew that, too. Only now do I affix it to him as well.”

At the time, Dr. X never considered telling anyone about his abuse. The priest had said, “This is between you and me. God thinks it’s OK. You don’t have to tell your mommy and daddy.” In retrospect, Dr. X believes his mother was in love with the priest, albeit from a worshipful distance. In any case, he felt sure that all hell would break loose if he told about the abuse, and that he, not the priest, would be the loser. “He was awesome. He would not be blamed. He was God-like.”

Dr. X was ambivalent about what the priest was doing. While he had an underlying sense of disgust, he now feels that he was somehow seduced into thinking that participating in these acts was good and noble. “I remember once, at age six or so, laying there, expecting him to come in. I lay there in the form of a crucifix. I thought he’d see me as Jesus. I’d please him. I so wanted his attention!” His self-esteem

depended on the priest's coming in and making him feel special. "I had a love affair with him in my heart, even at age five."

In addition, Dr. X felt, as Julian had, that his priest held out the promise of helping the boy become like himself, worldly and well read. "I somehow thought he would show me how to be intelligent and sophisticated, how to live in a better way, not like my redneck family. I don't know how much of that was my fantasy, but certainly his manner reinforced the idea -- he was on a pedestal, aloof, someone to be in awe of."

Differentiating between the physical and psychological abuse by his father and the sexual abuse by the priest, Dr. X said, "I had no power in either situation, but somehow my connection to my father remained. I could actively hate him as a counterpart to my love. He was a man. A sick, scary, fucked-up, angry, mean, heartless man at times, but loving, strong, safe, and capable of protecting me, too. The priest was lascivious, stomach sickening, confusing, obligatory, awesome, and desirable. My relationship with him did not carry the attachment, dependency, and love that I felt with my father. Yet I was more powerless with him in a way, given his religious status."

Noting how vulnerable he was, Dr. X at first said that his trauma would have been of an equal magnitude had his abuser been someone other than a priest. "Perhaps if my dad had sex with me I would feel the same way about him, but it was the priest, in his God-like position and his misuse of it, that soured me to ultimate authority. Although today I think that is a good thing, at that time it left me hopeless, angry, rebellious, hostile, and running in circles. I survived. I did not live."

Even though he says he is now glad that his eyes were opened to the "hypocrisy" of religion through his trauma, it is clear that there was a painful crisis of

faith because of the specific nature of his relationship to his abuser:

“I felt it was God’s representative on earth that opened my eyes to God’s failing. I don’t believe in God today at all any more.” Reconsidering, he went on: “I am angry at God. To the degree God exists for me I am angry at Him. The idea of a Supreme Being was shattered for me by this man. He introduced evidence to me that God failed, that God won’t protect you or prevent bad things from happening to you. The fact that it was a priest was cataclysmic. It taught me that there is a lie in the world. I developed a slowly evolving cynicism. As I got older and gave up on my piety, I grew to hate the smells, sounds, feelings of the Church — the incense, the collars, the robes. My spirituality and ability to believe in a higher power were destroyed.”

Wrestling with the idea of whether and how priest abuse is different from abuse by others, especially fathers, Dr. X said, “What is unique is that one’s connection to religious belief, trust in God, belief in a higher power, all becomes skewed, confused, shaken, questioned, tainted. And that might be a good thing, ultimately. I think it was for me.” Yet, he went on to say, “The fact of his ‘priestness’ had little real specific contribution. It was more the betrayal, the stigmatization, the powerlessness, the frustration. His priestness just gave him the right-of-way. Being a priest was his ticket to taking advantage. His tool. Like anyone who abuses a child. They all have some tool.”

Conclusion

Why do the media focus more on the effect of the scandals of 2002 on the Catholic Church than on the effect of sexual betrayal by priests on young children?

Perhaps we all would like to have faith in the basic goodness of the Church, and focusing on how the Church is affected by scandal somehow forces us to consider how to make the Church regain its exalted state. Obviously, such concerns are legitimate, and it is crucial that Church practices in relation to predatory priests be reformed.

But I think that a more important cause of this relative neglect of victims by the media is the fundamental taboo many of us continue to have about boys being sexual victims. The media are faced with hundreds of hurting male victims of sexual abuse by priests. Yet, like many of us, they seem unable to consider for long the effects of these betrayals. I have personally found this to be true when being interviewed by some reporters about the sexual abuse of boys. The reporters, of course, want to know about numbers and facts. But when I talk about the specific outrageous acts that sexual abuse inflicts on boys, or the long-term negative effects of these acts, the reporters sometimes gasp in horror and disbelief. None of us wants to hear these stories.

If a parent betrays a child in a fundamental way, the child's resulting wounds are profound. To the extent that a priest is experienced as a father, he will likewise be the object of conflicting, complex feelings. Therefore, if a priest is a child's Father, his betrayal affects the child to his core.

The boys of St. Vincent were perfectly aware that they were orphans and that their abusers were not their parents. Yet they had nowhere else to turn -- their world was totally controlled by their abusers. The concept of in loco parentis was literally true for them. Their priests became both their parents and their abusers. Consequently, the aftereffects of their abuse were devastating, affecting virtually all aspects of their lives.

The men I have described whom I treated and interviewed were not in quite the perilous situation of the orphans. They each had other resources, flawed and

inadequate though those resources were. Yet each of these men was in a vulnerable psychological state. Indeed, their vulnerability is what made them easy targets for priest/predators. As boys, they looked to their abusers for solace and support, and they were betrayed. The trauma in all three cases was shattering.

Overlaying the betrayal in all three cases was the specific effect on the child's spiritual life following abuse by someone trusted as a representative of God. Each one had a terrible crisis of faith. Those whose religious feelings were destroyed were thereby further alienated from their religiously observant families. The boys survived, and yet they were truly victims of what Shengold (1989) has aptly called "soul murder."

References

- Brod, H., and Kaufman, M. (Eds.). (1994). Theorizing masculinities. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bromberg, P. M. (1994). "Speak! That I may see you": Some reflections on dissociation, reality, and psychoanalytic listening. Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 4, 517-547.
- Bromberg, P. M. (1998). Standing in the spaces: Essays on clinical process, trauma, and dissociation. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Cheselka, O. (1996). Betrayal: Common and extraordinary. A paper presented at the William Alanson White Institute Clinical Services Case Conference, New York, NY.
- Davies, J. M. , and Frawley, M. G. (1992). Dissociative processes and transference-countertransference paradigms in the psychoanalytically-oriented treatment of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 2, 5-36.
- Davies, J. M., and Frawley, M. G. (1994). Treating the adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse: A psychoanalytic perspective. New York: Basic Books.
- Ferenczi, S. (1933). Confusion of tongues between adults and the child. In: Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis, ed. M. Balint (trans E. Mosbacher). London: Karnac Books; 1980, pp. 156-167.
- Gartner, R. B. (1996). Incestuous boundary violations in families of borderline patients. Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 32, 73-80.
- Gartner, R. B. (1997a). Considerations in the psychoanalytic treatment of men who were sexually abused as children. Psychoanalytic Psychology, 14, 13-41.
- Gartner, R. B. (1997b). An analytic group for sexually abused men. International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 47, 373-383.
- Gartner, R.B. (1999a). Betrayed as boys: Psychodynamic treatment of sexually abused men. New York: Guilford Press.
- Gartner, R.B. (1999b). Cinematic depictions of boyhood sexual victimization. Gender and Psychoanalysis, 4:253-289.

Gartner, R.B. (1999c). Relational aftereffects in manhood of boyhood sexual abuse. Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy, 29:319-353.

Gartner, R.B. (1999d). Sexual victimization of boys by men: Meanings and consequences. Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy, 3:1-33.

Gartner, R.B. (2002). Effects on boys of priest abuse. Psychologist-Psychoanalyst, 22:15-17

Henton, D., and McCann, D. (1995). Boys don't cry: The struggle for justice and healing in Canada's biggest sex abuse scandal. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Holmes, W., and Slap, G. (1998). Sexual abuse of boys: Definition, prevalence, correlates, sequelae, and management. Journal of the American Medical Association, 280, 1855-1862.

Hunter, M. (1990). Abused boys: The neglected victims of sexual abuse. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books

Levant, R. F. (1995). Toward the reconstruction of masculinity. In R. F. Levant and W. S. Pollack (Eds.), A new psychology of men (pp. 229-251). New York: Basic Books.

Levant, R. F., and Pollack, W. S. (Eds.). (1995). A new psychology of men. New York: Basic Books.

Lew, M. (1988). Victims no longer. New York: Harper and Row.

Lisak, D. (1995). Integrating a critique of gender in the treatment of male survivors of childhood abuse. Psychotherapy, 32, 258-269.

Lisak, D. , Hopper, J., and Song, P. (1996). Factors in the cycle of violence: Gender rigidity and emotional constriction. Journal of Traumatic Stress, 9, 721-743.

Pleck, J. H. (1981). The myth of masculinity. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Pleck, J. H. (1995). The gender role strain paradigm: An update. In R. F. Levant and W. S. Pollack (Eds.), A new psychology of men (pp. 11-32). New York: Basic Books.

Pollack, W. S. (1995). No man is an island: Toward a new psychoanalytic psychology of men. In R. F. Levant and W. Pollack (Eds.), A new psychology of men (pp. 33-67). New York: Basic Books.

Pollack, W. S. (1998). Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood. New York: Random House.

Putnam, F. (1989). The diagnosis and treatment of multiple personality disorder. New York: The Guilford Press.

Putnam, F. (1992). Dissociative phenomena. Review of Psychiatry, 10, 145-160.

Shengold, L. (1989). Soul murder. New York: Fawcett Columbine.