

CANNIBALIZING THE PRIESTHOOD

As reported for years, the Catholic Church is suffering from an acute, soon-to-be critical, shortage of priests. As efforts increase to analyze and remedy this crisis, little mention is made of one chilling factor in this shortage—clergy sexual abuse. Many vocations have been “killed” by the actions of clergy abusers. Why do I say this? As the mother of a clergy abuse suicide victim, I have been horrified by the stories of many men nationwide whose dreams of becoming “another Christ” were shattered by clergy sexual abuse, abuse suffered as a young child, altar boy, adolescent, or seminarian. Criminal actions in parishes, schools, youth groups, and seminaries have violated both body and spirit, destroying potential vocations.

Since speaking at the Bishops’ Sexual Abuse Ad Hoc Committee meeting in Dallas in June 2002 and at the National Lay Review Board meeting with Frank Keating in Oklahoma City in September 2002, my husband and I have heard from survivors and their families nationwide. This emerging family of “moral witnesses” continues to grow daily as more and more anguished voices lament the suffering inflicted by predators in a Roman collar.

One 35-year-old victim recounted that, as a child, he had yearned to become a priest. Shortly after his clergy abuse at 13, he plunged into alcohol and drugs to dull his suffering and confusion. His most recent suicide attempt involved his holding a cocked gun to his head for hours before a SWAT team convinced him to lower the gun.

Another survivor, now a close friend, talks of his childhood desire to become a priest. Following his sexual abuse by Father Geoghan, he descended into a hell of drugs and alcohol. He estimates half of his abused classmates are now dead—victims of suicide, drug overdose, alcoholism, or other self-destructive behavior.

A Midwest family grieves their son’s intense suffering, ending with his suicide at 21. Unknown to them, he had been abused as a second grader by their pastor. Prior to his abuse at eight, their son had often played “pretend” priest with his siblings. After a highly-troubled adolescence, he declared himself an atheist, sensing no God in his despair. His mother will never recover from the shock of seeing the body of her lifeless son lying in her driveway.

Survivors who remain practicing Catholics refuse to promote the priesthood to their sons. Many Catholic parents are puzzled by sons, once desirous of the priesthood, who now want nothing to do with religion in any way, shape, or form.

At a St. Louis conference for survivors in June 2003, almost one-third of the men who spoke at the open-mike session mentioned that prior to their abuse they had thought of becoming priests. Listening to them, I realized that the Church had been robbed of an untold number of future priests.

A West Coast victim told me of his abuse in a minor seminary. After abandoning his studies for the priesthood, he entered into a disastrous marriage, and now survives only through his love for his young daughter. His story relates to those of other former seminarians who have felt forced out of certain seminaries because of the sexual overtures, actions, and climate endured there.

One former seminarian e-mailed me that at age 21 he was raped by a seminary priest. He then recounted the familiar saga of a subsequent pain-infused life, with psychiatric hospitalizations, alcohol abuse, and failed educational attempts.

A minor seminarian in the Southwest, 16 at the time, pressed charges against his priest abuser. Despite the priest's guilty plea, this young man's bravery was rewarded by ostracism and anger from his church community for the "embarrassment" and "shame" they suffered. His emotional abandonment was further intensified during his civil suit by savage questioning from church attorneys. At 20, he hanged himself, leaving a grieving mother behind. His mother still has not cashed her church settlement check issued before her son's death. After all, how far can ten dollars go?

The above tragic examples point to another story-- whole branches of Catholic families abandoning the Church. By their sinful actions, perpetrator priests often alienate not only the victims and survivors but also their family members. Most of these families have a Catholic heritage dating back hundreds of years. Feeling betrayed by religious perpetrators and by the secrecy of many dioceses and religious orders, some Catholics feel no recourse but to turn away from their spiritual roots. Vocations will no longer be fostered within these close-knit families.

In effect, innocents have been devoured by these abusers. An institution that allows some members to injure and destroy other members lacks moral clarity and spiritual resolve. By "cannibalizing" the Church's future priests, clergy perpetrators have severely decimated the ranks of upcoming priests. No person of integrity can tolerate this evil. With brutal honesty and true justice, spiritual "wolves" can be cornered, captured, and caged.

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