



### I13 Holy Crime: Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the psychopathic mechanisms underlying a phenomenon that spread in some realms of the Catholic church, namely the sexual abuse of minors.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by serving as an example on which to base a scientific explanation of the phenomenon not only in terms of the victims, but also of the offenders.

The John Jay Report of 2004 revealed that in most cases of sexual abuse of minors that came to light concerning the Catholic church in the United States between 1950 and 2002, the episodes involved puberal, preadolescent, and adolescent minors, and so should really be referred to as ephrophilia (offence against minors aged 10 to 17 years). In total, 4,329 priests (accounting for 4.3% of parish priests and 2.5% of priests belonging to religious communities) were accused, on plausible evidence, of the sexual abuse of minors.<sup>1</sup>

Sexual abuse by priests seems to be a reactive behavior likely generated by insufficient emotional, affective, sexual, and relational maturity; in other words, a compensation mechanism that attempts to fill a void of affection, erotism, and sexuality. The abuse is seen and rationalized as similar to masturbation or pornography so that it does not tarnish the public function of a church minister. The choice of a minor is also due to the fact that satisfaction is thus sought outside the commitment of a relationship.

The John Jay College of Criminal Justice reported (referring to 2004) that 64% of the accused priests had abused males only, 22.4% females only, and 3.6% had abused both sexes. This has very often led to attributing the plague of sexual abuse to an increase in the number of homosexual priests.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, it is sexual immaturity, due to entering a seminary at an early age, and the lack of any sexual education, together with a strong vulnerability to narcissism (in relational terms), that leads the subject to turn his attentions to young people of both sexes. The youths are perceived as psychosexual peers. The sexual choice (mostly male) largely reflects opportunity rather than sexual leanings. It is easier to approach boys and there can be no fear of unwanted pregnancy, as is risked in relations with puberal or postpuberal girls. Finally, some priests conceive of celibacy as the abstention from sexual relations with women. Therefore, they convince themselves that sexual relations with boys do not contravene their vow of celibacy. The boy is seen simply as a means for obtaining pleasure in all safety.

Those most likely to suffer abuse by ministers, the victims, are generally young people with some social or physical lack, who are therefore vulnerable. At first, they feel “special” because they have been chosen by the charismatic figure of the priest, but later they develop conflicting, confused feelings during the episodes of abuse, and, finally, they feel betrayed and alienated from the church.

Sexual abuse by a priest is a sexual and relational betrayal perpetrated by a Father Confessor of the community — a man the child has learned to trust more than any other since birth. Therefore, it is a psychological shock for the victim, provoked by a violent overstimulation and personal betrayal that triggers the activation of various defense mechanisms. As a result of the sexual abuse, the child loses faith in the world as a relatively safe, foreseeable place, is unable to build a positive, confident self-image, and can no longer trust in relationships with others.<sup>2</sup>

In order to contain the phenomenon, it is not sufficient for physicians and psychologists to study only the victims; they need to analyze the perpetrators as well and conduct a scientific study of their traits, personalities, and internal operative models. This is not easy, because the institutions and public opinion are ill-equipped to deal with crimes that arouse such strong, aggressive reactions. The expert approaching the study of such phenomena could run into difficulty when faced with feelings and behaviors that test his/her empathic powers and so run the risk of collusion. The adoption of a scientific approach in the attempt to help the perpetrator, too, may interrupt the cycle of violence and thus offer real help for victims, past, present, and future.<sup>3</sup>

#### Reference(s):

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#### Children, Sexual Crimes, Priests