

The Sexual Abuse Scandal in the Church
By Father John Clay
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I'm going to be reflecting with you this afternoon about the sexual abuse scandal in the church, which everybody's talking about and is in all the papers. As I was mulling over it through the week I thought, I can't keep all this stuff in my head, so I wrote it out. I wrote it out, I just couldn't keep it all straight.

First, remember, whatever you feel is OK. I'm not going to tell you how to feel. Whatever you feel is OK. In these preliminary remarks, I'm going to talk about the effects of abuse that are huge, and the response of our church leaders, and then I'm going to talk about what we need to do.

I think a lot of times we either kind of automatically want to defend the church, some of us; on the other hand, some of us want to automatically vilify the church. And when we do this, we're not really seeking the truth. This is not my place, either to vilify the church or to defend the church, but to see what happened. I'm not going to judge the conscience of anyone, I want to look at the behaviors. Because I can't tell what's in the conscience.

It's also important to understand there's been a revolution in the understanding of sexual abuse, and our judgment about this has to be taken in context. The whole evolution of something which, back in the '50s when I was ordained, '51, was under our radar screen. There are two parts to the problem: One is the sexual abuse that happened, the other is the response of our church leaders and their accountability. And also remember, too, the victims are not only the children, the young people, but also adult people at times too. I think it's good to remember that automatic defense of our church does not really protect the church. I think the health of the church demands that we look at things very deeply and very honestly as we can, admit what is wrong and see the work we have to do and change things.

This also is my personal reflection. I'm not an expert on the matter. I have some understanding of it, but this is the way I see it. No better than that, no worse than that.

The effects of abuse are huge. They can actually ruin a person's life. I know this in a first-hand way because of the times I've had to deal with it. Often people come to me or they're sent to me because of the abuse by clergy. It's devastating. Any abuse is devastating. It makes life difficult, it louses up relationships, it causes much confusion, it often leaves a kind of a mark of "I'm no good, I'm shameful, I'm not worthy." These are terrible, terrible things. And so we have to recognize the effects. What that means too is that because these effects are so extreme, our efforts to correct it need to be extreme.

Now, about the response of our church leaders: Their initial response was to do little or nothing to protect those who were abused. There was little understanding of what this was all about, in fact the disease and the addictive factors were not really recognized. It often looked like, "This is a moral issue." So what's the solution? You go to confession,

confess your sin, and promise not to do it again. This is kind of inconceivable now. But that was much of the thinking that was there at that time.

It also was thought, too, as a little more understanding grew, that therapy could solve the problem of pedophilia. And so sometimes what happened was, the priest was sent for treatment, and the treatment center would say, "You're OK now." That happened too. We want to take a look at the whole picture as best we can. But that seems very strange to us today. I mean, almost nobody would think this way now, today. But that was really very common, back then. And how much of this lack of response was due to not knowing about what this was all about? How much was to protect the reputation of the church? I can't really judge that, at all. But the bottom line is: The victims were not recognized, or helped.

In our diocese in the '80s, the problem began to be taken seriously. This was uncharted territory. There were flaws in what was done. But it was started to be taken very seriously. This has been improving through the years, but we need constant vigilance. I must say this, though: that we've come a long way in this country (we'll talk about that a little bit later), also in this diocese, and also in our parish.

In our parish we have spent many, many hours on background checks on everybody who has any kind of interaction with young people, or vulnerable adults. There's constant monitoring. There's also the training which goes in, which you had to do. We're Johnny-Come-Latelies, this is true. But a whole lot has really been done. The archdiocese I think has done reasonably well. There are some places where it has not been done as well. But I think generally speaking in our country we're a long ways better that we were back in 2002.

Pope John Paul II, as far as I know, provided little leadership about this. There was a thinking in the Vatican and also among a lot of others not in the United States that this was an American problem. "It's you Americans, you know, with all your loose morals, and all the liberty and the freedoms and stuff like that, this is what's causing all this stuff. This is not our problem, this is an American problem." We're beginning to realize now that was a long way from the truth. But all these things influenced decisions.

We come to Pope Benedict XVI. In his early years as archbishop of Munich and his early years in the Vatican, he didn't provide much leadership either. He was in the same mode, with the same thinking, as most religious leaders were, and that's why not much was done.

But then there was a change in 2001. John Allen, who reports about the Vatican in the National Catholic Reporter, said, he saw a big change in Pope Benedict XVI starting in 2001. He was starting to get it. After he became pope – that was in 2005 – he took action against two high-ranking prelates for the abuse that they were in. These were prelates who had strong backing in the Vatican. And he bucked that. It was a change. It was a change. Also, when he came to the United States and Australia, he apologized to the

victims and he also met with some of the victims. This was something that had never been done by a pope before.

Also, don't forget about Ireland, the troubles in Ireland. My Irish mother would be rolling in her grave. He called some of the hierarchy of Ireland to Rome, about the scandal that was there. You see, there's really a big change in Pope Benedict.

Also we read too about this priest in India who was accused of rape in northern Minnesota. He's in India now. Interesting enough, his bishop would not help in extraditing this priest back here to the United States. What the Vatican did is, they withdrew the jurisdiction of the bishop over that priest, and put the jurisdiction to the National Conference of Bishops of India. So I want to call attention to the evolution in Pope Benedict XVI. This is not to excuse, not to vilify, nothing like that. But see, we want to try to see – what exactly is the situation? We don't make it better; we don't make it worse. And so we have to look at the evolution in the thinking of Pope Benedict XVI. And I would suggest there's probably been an evolution in the thinking of a lot of us. I'm not where I was 20 years ago in my thinking about this. It didn't even pass the radar screen at that time.

What do we need to do?

We need continuing apology to the victims. And help restoring their lives. And also continued monitoring. I'll tell you my own situation too. This is a little bit embarrassing. Back in the '60s I kissed two women inappropriately. I'm still being monitored. It's OK. This is the structure that we need. Just think about that. This was a long time ago.

We need a public acknowledgment from our church leaders that our leadership has failed to protect victims. That's what happened. Meanwhile, what's in the conscience of individual church leaders, I have no way of knowing. We've done a lot here to make children safe. Much more. And in this country – there are a few exceptions – we've made great progress in addressing the problem. In 2002, the bishop of this country made the charter protection of children and young people. That, in 2002, changed the climate of the country dramatically. I think it's the same year that Boston had its scandal. Like anybody else, you've got to get pushed before you do something. The larger church has a long way to go. And I believe that addressing the accountability of bishops who failed to protect children will happen only with the firm hand of the Vatican. Without that, I don't think it will happen.

Also we need to face the human tendency to deny what we don't want to face and to discount stuff we don't want to hear. Aren't we all like that? We don't want to hear what we don't want to hear, and we don't want to face what we don't want to face. It's in me. It's in all of us human beings. So we all have to face up to being human beings and look at ourselves honestly. And for me that's one of the hardest things to do. Really hard.

One of the things the Second Vatican Council stressed was, the church is the people of God. I think we have something unconscious inside of us, we don't even realize it: we

kind of identify the clergy with the church. Don't we do that? I think it's underneath. It's understandable, too, because I think in some ways through the years that was kind of the way it was, you know? The priest in a new parish would say: "I want you to pray, pay and obey." We learned that. We have to let go of that thinking. It's the people of God. And the whole purpose of clergy is to serve the people of God.

One of the problems is, when we clergy live in a clerical culture that says we are elite, special, above lay people, what are we going to do? This human tendency we have to deny, which exists across the board, is going to be magnified. And that's going to draw us to protect our own. It's human. That is the danger of a clerical culture. And we clergy must recognize we are unworthy servants. It's my hope that this crisis will jolt us into that humility. My experience of humility is this: It's not something I choose. I get knocked into it. And I think that's pretty common.

I have some final thoughts, too: Our church is like a watermelon. And just as a watermelon needs the rind, and the sweet, juicy inside, the church needs both the structure and the sweet, juicy inside, which is the message and reality of Jesus. That message and reality is that we are loved by this infinite love. That infinite love we name God brings forgiveness and salvation to the world. That is what the church is all about. You see, if there were no structure, that message would be lost, which would be tragic. But once you get a structure, you've got all these human things that are in there. And when the structure dims that message too badly, then we have to begin the painful task of reforming the structure.

Now if you are a victim, I encourage you not to run away, but stay and help, firmly and humbly, to do what we need to do. If you are a victim and you need to leave the church over this issue, I understand completely. I'm not sure that would help in the healing. That's something only you can judge. If you're not a victim, remember that the church is all of us who are baptized. I am not more a part of the church than you are. Ordination doesn't make us a part of the church. Baptism makes us a part of the church. And so, remembering that, I encourage you to stay and help with the solution.

I want to make my own apologies too. I've been a priest almost 59 years. I can't imagine how many people I've offended in those 59 years. Things I probably don't even remember, maybe I didn't realize what I was doing at the time, or maybe I did. And so I wanted to apologize to anybody I've hurt, whatever way it might be, and I don't know all the different kinds of ways. And particularly I ask that if I've done it to any of you. I think it would be impossible that I wouldn't have hurt you sometimes. But I apologize for that, and I'm sorry. But also as a priest I would like to apologize for the priesthood, for the hurt that's been done. I'm really sorry about that and I apologize.

And finally, I have the hope, the real hope and belief, that the spirit of God will use this crisis to transform us.

So we can pray about this. Sit back, relax, close your eyes, and keep your back straight. Breathe slowly and deeply, slowly and deeply. Let the cares, the worries, the fears, the

hates, the angers, the vengeance, the cruelty, the bitterness, loneliness, despair, and depression fall away. We are surrounded by love, the love we name God. That love holds us, embraces us, cradles us...looks at us tenderly and with compassion. That love lives deep within our souls and bubbles up with powerful healing energy.

Let us now be aware of the ways we have been hurt by church and others, the ways we have hurt other people, the wounds that are there. When our wounds are there, let us remember, we are embraced by the love that is God. No matter how bad those wounds have been, no matter where they came from, our God is loving us and sees our goodness.

And when we are tempted to think because of what has happened to us—that we are less than other people—and we feel guilty and ashamed, let us let that go. Remember that we are good. And when we look at the way we have hurt other people, let us face that as well. In facing that and recognizing what we have done, that is the beginning of change and transformation.

No matter who we are or what was done, whatever side we are on, or on both sides, we are loved by the love that is God. Let us surrender ourselves to that love and invite that love into us more and more deeply to heal us, change us, transform us, and help us become the people that God wants everyone of us to be.

God bless you.