Listening in on a Family Crisis: Catholic Responses to Sexual Abuse in the Church

A review of

Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002–2012
by Thomas G. Plante and Kathleen L. McChesney (Eds.)
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The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2012) has reported that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before they reach the age of 18. Ninety-six percent of those who sexually abuse children are men, and over 75 percent of the abusers are adults. It is also estimated that almost 90 percent of child sexual abuse goes unreported to authorities. Maniglio’s (2009) systematic analysis of 14 reviews of research collectively including 270,000 subjects on the outcomes of child sexual abuse concluded that this form of abuse functions as a nonspecific risk factor for a wide range of mental and physical illnesses.

Child sexual abuse often involves a betrayal of trust, with over one third of those who sexually abuse children being a relative of the victim. The issue of betrayal has been exacerbated when the child is abused by a person who is given a sacred trust within a
religious culture. In such cases the damage done by abuse can be experienced as a desecration (Doehring, 1993).

This has been a prominent theme in the public outcries about the abuse scandals within the Roman Catholic Church during the last decade. Media attention on these scandals may now be on the decline in North America compared with its prominence during the first decade of the millennium. Yet the issue continues to have a dramatic impact on the Catholic Church. *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002–2012* provides a rich discussion of many different facets of the topic, focusing on the various efforts to understand, redress, and prevent the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy.

Although various psychological treatments of clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse have explored the topic from specific psychological paradigms, such as religious coping theory (Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Mahoney, 2008) or psychodynamic formulations (Kochansky, Cohen, Frawley-O’Dea, & Goldner, 2007), the chapters in this text represent a more heterogeneous and multidisciplinary approach, without a unifying theoretical or psychological paradigm. They are written by a diverse group of contributors with backgrounds that include clinical psychology, sociology, various clerical roles, concerned Catholic laity, victims of clergy abuse, criminology, the judiciary, and business.

The contributions vary in tone from near-apologetic defenses of the Catholic response to painful indictments about the church’s failings. The vast majority of writers have a Roman Catholic background, regardless of the adopted tone. This leaves the reader with an impression that one is listening in on a difficult family conversation about abuse that has been revealed.

For instance, the retired Australian bishop Geoffrey Robinson offers a chapter that lays significant blame for the issue on problematic aspects of Catholic culture. One of those aspects is a culture of obsessive secrecy [that] has been a powerful factor in the mishandling of the abuse. It is a sad fact that, if the entire church has been slow to respond properly to the abuse, the slowest part of all has been its central bureaucracy. (p. 99)

Several other contributors also charge that the church’s culture of secrecy has been a significant barrier to understanding and/or preventing the problem. Although some blame the problem on such implicit features of Roman Catholic religious communities, others see it as being fostered through canon law and other explicit church policies, stemming back centuries, some of which were promulgated hidden from public awareness. These policies kept clerical sexual misconduct a sensitive matter that was often handled in relative secrecy, without public disclosure even to potentially vulnerable congregants.

The editors chose as the temporal focus of the text the decade stemming from 2002 to the present (i.e., 2012). Several contributors make a convincing case that the contemporary sexual abuse scandal in the church can be seen as evolving through three distinct phases,
starting in the late 1970s or early 1980s and going through a period of organized response in the 1990s that was the precursor to the developments over the last decade.

The pivotal date of 2002 appears to have been chosen for two reasons. First, in early 2002 the *Boston Globe* published a report of widespread and long-standing abuse of large numbers of children by Catholic clerics such as Father John Geoghan, who alone was alleged to have abused 138 children. The scandal worsened as evidence suggested that recidivist patterns of abuse went unchecked, even when reported, through reassignments and other cover-up strategies by at least some Catholic superiors, such as Cardinal Bernard Law of the Boston Diocese.

A second reason for benchmarking the public crisis to 2002 is that in June of that year, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued its Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, known widely as the Dallas Charter after the location of the meeting. The charter initiated a series of action steps to address the scandal. The scope of the scandal, and its impact on the church, has been profound, as authors recount in their discussions of various changes over the ensuing decade.

Virtually every domain of Catholic life and culture has been marked by the scandal, from the creation of policies, guidance on the application of canon law, the laicization of nearly 1,000 priests in the wake of credible allegations of abuse, financial crises resulting from hundreds of settlements that have driven whole dioceses into bankruptcy protection, to calls for modification of long-standing tenets of Catholicism such as required clergy celibacy, as well as to a hardening of some of those tenets in other cases.

The editors are to be commended for the varied snapshots of this tragically momentous period of Catholic history that are made possible by their choice of contributors. All of the chapter authors have been deeply involved in the issue. For instance, Thomas Plante, a clinical psychologist and past president of the American Psychological Association’s Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, has been a widely sought-out consultant by the Catholic Church. He is the vice chair for the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Youth established by the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops. This consulting lay body was tasked with providing guidance and oversight to the council as it attempted to find an adequate path forward. His coeditor, Kathleen McChesney, was the first executive director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection established by the council. Her law enforcement and investigative background from the FBI and corporate leadership positions provided a relevant complement to Plante’s clinical approach.

Perhaps because of their deep connections to the American Catholic Church’s response to the crisis, the editors were able to pull together a group of contributors who all had similarly noteworthy vantage points on it. One of the most valuable consequences is that the reader is given some appreciation of how this large religious culture has struggled to respond to what may be transformative crisis. The stories told and cases made are typically done so from an insider’s perspective but at the same time provide vital glimpses of social
transformations and dynamics that should be mostly accessible, even for a reader who is not steeped in American Catholicism.

The downside of this sort of project is the unevenness in the way the writers make their cases and in the positions they take. Some present primarily anecdotal evidence and then make sweeping assertions about causes and possible cures for the abuse problem. Others write polemics that seem closer to a homily than to an evidential case that one might find in the social sciences. The value for the empirically minded psychological scientist will come from the scattered statistics and case summaries that are included in a number of the chapters.

The second chapter, written by researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal justice, contains a lion’s share of the quantitative findings summarized in the volume. The authors present summary data from two studies they conducted during the last 10 years, which analyzed data on abuse allegation cases from the records of all U.S. dioceses from 1950 to 2002. The researchers explored the prevalence, incidence, and covariates of the problem on the basis of the collected data pool, finding a peak abuse incidence of over 2,300 cases in the early 1970s that declined to 60 cases during the 2005–2008 period.

The chapter presents summaries of typical victim, perpetrator, and abuse situation characteristics. Although the chapter would have benefited from a clear discussion of the study’s methodological limitations, it does present a helpful overview of the nature of the crises at least as reflected in the diocesan records.

The editors use the collected data and other information to challenge several myths around the scandal. First, they note that despite the dramatic media attention that followed the *Boston Globe* report, the popular idea that the Catholic Church was either unaware of the problem or in complete denial is false: The Catholic hierarchy and many in the laity were aware of the problem and taking steps to address it in the decades prior to 2002. The extensive actions that are the focus of the text are argued to be a continuation and expansion of a response already initiated within the church years prior.

The editors also assert that the data do not support the allegation that there is something about being a Catholic cleric that makes one particularly prone to abuse. There is no greater risk for sex offense against minors by Catholic clerics than by men in the general population or by clergy in other religious denominations.

An important issue that is given too little systematic attention throughout the book is the view of some Catholics that the child abuse problem is a problem arising from the presence of homosexuals in the priesthood. These assertions have increased in part because the data indicate that 81 percent of the clergy’s victims are postpubescent teens. In addition, studies have suggested that the percentage of priests with a homosexual orientation may be five or 10 times higher than the percentage of homosexuality in the general population. Yet the editors challenge the homosexual explanation because it is premised on the idea that homosexuality is associated with greater likelihood of sexual predation, something denied by mental health associations (Clark, 2006; Coleman, 2004).
Despite the absence of a compelling case for the homosexual cause hypothesis, the Catholic Church has recently reinforced its position that it is inappropriate to admit individuals with a homosexual orientation into its clerical orders or even into seminary training. In describing the screening process used for Catholic clergy, Plante notes that such psychological screening may be hindered in openly exploring a person’s sexual development because the disclosure of a homosexual orientation could disqualify one from further consideration.

A few of the authors suggest that the church’s attitudes toward sexuality may work counter to the church fulfilling its own goal of fostering clerics with the psychospiritual maturity to successfully navigate their own sexuality and intimacy needs in the celibate vocation that they are attempting to follow. Ironically, a desire to “screen out” what may be a spurious cause for the child sex abuse problem may contribute to forming a priestly culture that could interfere with its prevention.

Yet we must be cautious before concluding too much here. Wild speculation and sweeping, hasty conclusions have frequently accompanied the scandal over the last decade, often in support of readily detectable agendas. As the editors have pointed out:

Some who have conflicts or issues with the Church or who maintain a particular conservative or liberal agenda have used this crisis to try to advance their particular goals. For example, those who are in favor of women and married priests or who believe homosexuals should not be allowed in the priesthood find reasons to justify their causes within the clergy abuse story. Flames of centuries old anti-Catholic bias and prejudice have also been reignited. (p. 249)

_Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002–2012_ does not constitute a comprehensive social scientific investigation of child sexual abuse. The empirical data it does contain add little to our existing knowledge base about the etiology of child sexual abuse.

However, the volume does serve as a valuable resource for understanding a particular context that shapes the experience and consequence of child sexual abuse in dramatic ways. Child sexual abuse is not a particularly Catholic problem, but in the cases covered in the text, it does emerge with distinctively Catholic sequelae to the problem. Clinicians and researchers alike would benefit from reading the book to gain better insight into the crises being grappled with by this faith family.

**References**


