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Opinion

For Christ's sake: Confronting the culture of abuse within the Catholic Church

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In order to eradicate sexual abuse from the church, three things must be done: identify and remove all offenders, reach out to and assist victim/survivors, and identify and overcome the more fundamental causes of both abuse and the poor response to it.

Here I want to focus on the third of these, that of identifying the basic causes. But to begin with, a few preliminary remarks.

Firstly, there are some causal factors that are common to all offenders and others that are particular to each individual offender. In between these two, there are unhealthy factors within particular societies or organisations that can foster a culture in which abuse will more easily occur, or can compound the problem by contributing to a poor response. Needless to say, the church must look at broader factors in modern society that may have contributed to abuse, but this must never be to the exclusion of factors internal to the church. Indeed, because the church can change the latter in a way it cannot change the former, it must give particular attention to the internal factors.

Secondly, abuse is most likely to occur when the three elements of unhealthy psychology, unhealthy ideas and unhealthy living environment come together. Many studies have been done concerning unhealthy psychological elements, but much remains to be done concerning unhealthy ideas and unhealthy living environment. A poor response is most likely whenever anything within the culture causes the good of people to be subjected to the good, not so much of the community, but of the institution.

Thirdly, I suggest that the major fault of the church in this field is that it refuses to look at any teaching, law, practice or even attitude of the church itself as in any way contributing. In studying abuse, we must be free to follow the argument wherever it leads rather than impose in advance the limitation that our study must not demand

change in any teaching or law. We must admit that there might be elements of the "Catholic culture" that have contributed either to abuse or to the poor response to abuse.

So let me suggest some elements in that culture that deserve serious consideration.

1. The Angry God

In any religion, everything without exception depends on the kind of God that is being worshipped. It is the single most important fact about any religious system, for every aspect of the system will flow from it. And there has been a long history of "the angry god" in the Catholic Church, with the Inquisition being merely the most glaring example.

This conception of "God" created a church in which, despite the talk of love, practice was based too much on fear rather than love, and authorities always had the support of the angry God for their words and actions. Spirituality was too often seen in the negative terms of self-denial, self-abasement and rejection of the "world," and the Christian life was too often seen as consisting overwhelmingly in right behaviour before a judgemental God. A constricting guilt played too large a part.

These are unhealthy ideas that have contributed to unhealthy actions.

2. Moral Immaturity

Before a judgemental God, with the constant threat of hellfire, the all-important consideration is that we avoid wrong actions. But if human beings are to grow, two things are necessary: right actions and taking personal responsibility for those actions.

Yes, right actions are necessary, for we will not grow by lying, stealing or committing murder. It is equally necessary, however, that we take personal responsibility for our own actions. If a forty-year-old man is still in all things doing what his parents tell him to do and never thinking for himself, his growth has been most seriously impaired. A one-sided insistence on doing the right thing, to the detriment of actually thinking for oneself and taking responsibility for one's own actions, produces immature human beings. It, too, is based on fear rather than love.

Moral immaturity does not prepare people to cope with the many and varied temptations that will come to them over the course of a lifetime, and must be added to the list of factors contributing to the unhealthy climate in which abuse can arise. And the same immaturity has not helped authorities to respond to abuse.

3. Sex and the Angry God

For centuries the church has taught that every sexual sin is a mortal sin. According to that teaching, even deliberately deriving pleasure from thinking about sex, no matter how briefly, is a mortal sin. The teaching may not be proclaimed aloud today as much as before, but it was proclaimed by many popes, it has never been retracted and it has affected countless people.

The teaching fostered belief in an incredibly angry God, for this God would condemn a person to an eternity in hell for a single unrepented moment of deliberate sexual desire. Indeed, it is the teaching on sexual morality more than anything else that has kept the idea of the angry God alive and strong within the church. Belief in so horrendously angry a God specifically in the field of sex has been a most significant contribution to the unhealthy culture I am seeking to describe. It can lead to the unhealthy attitude of sexuality being seen as dark, secretive and troublesome.

Furthermore, this teaching helped to place the emphasis on the sexual sin against God rather than the offence against the abused minor. Paedophilia was, therefore, to be dealt with in exactly the same manner as any other sexual sin: confession, total forgiveness and restoration to one's former state, and this was a significant part of the motivation for the practice of moving priests around from one parish to another.

The problem is overcome only when, in forgiving a past wrong, we also see the necessity to take all precautions to prevent future wrong, and we will do this only when we appreciate the compulsions that paedophilia creates and place the emphasis, not on a sexual offence against God, but on an action that is deeply offensive to God precisely because of the harm caused to innocent children. I do not believe that God is upset by sexual desires or acts in and of themselves alone, but God is very upset by harm caused to people.

If the church moved away from a sexual morality based on the artificial concepts of "natural" and "unnatural," towards a morality based on persons and relationships, we would finally be basing sexual morality on the gospels rather than a theory that has little reference to the gospels. We would all have a healthier basis for our understanding of sexuality and for living our lives as sexual beings.

4. The Male Church

The sexual abuse of minors is overwhelmingly a male problem. Yes, some women have also offended, but the vast majority of offences have been by men. In relation to the response to abuse, the temptation to subject all other matters to the overriding importance of one's own good name and honour, with the consequent hiding of anything that would bring shame, is also a largely male concern, with a long history behind it in many so-called "honour-shame" cultures.

Sexual abuse has arisen in a church in which all power is in the hands of men, where all the dogmas, teachings, laws, customs and even attitudes are those of men. All authority is in the hands of men, and all the imagery is masculine - for, after all the talk, God is still fundamentally seen as male. Indeed, even men's ways of being

human beings have been seen as normative for all human beings. Women have had no voice in articulating the church's doctrine, morals or law. Banned from the pulpit and the altar, their wisdom has not been permitted to interpret the gospel nor their spirituality to lead the church in prayer.

It is surely reasonable to assume that, if women had been given far greater importance and a much stronger voice, the church would not have seen the same level of abuse and would have responded far better to this overwhelmingly male problem.

5. A Culture of Celibacy

The predominant culture has not just been male, but celibate male, for all power has been in the hands of celibate males. In the atmosphere created by this fact, celibacy was the ideal, and the only concession made was that, in the words of Paul, "it is better to marry than to burn" (1 Corinthians 7:9), so that marriage was seen to involve an element of failure to strive for perfection.

I am not suggesting that the preference for celibacy is the sole or even predominant cause of abuse, but I believe it has made a significant contribution, both directly and indirectly. It has certainly been a major contributor to the other massive problem the church has not yet begun to face: the sexual abuse of adult females.

Actually, celibacy itself is not the problem, but *obligatory celibacy*. A celibacy that is freely embraced out of a passionate love for God and people is not unhealthy. But a celibacy that, sometime after ordination or final profession, becomes unwanted, unaccepted and unassimilated, is both unhealthy and dangerous, for it is a celibacy without love. It then contributes to unhealthy psychology (such as depression), unhealthy ideas (like misogyny) and unhealthy living environment (like loneliness).

The preparation for a life of celibacy in the seminaries and novitiates was negative ("Don't do this, avoid that"), and there was little assistance in building healthy friendships, especially with women. The only answer given to the problems this creates was that God would provide all the love and friendship one might need. And yet it is not enough for authorities to say that priests and religious freely took on the obligation of celibacy, that divine love is abundant and that all that is needed is that they pray harder. This undervaluing of the importance of human love and friendship contains serious dangers.

Given sufficient motivation, some young persons might be prepared to embrace a life without genital sex, but no young persons in their right mind should ever embrace a life without love. Sadly, many priests and religious are living their lives without a minimal sense of loving and being loved. This can lead, not only to one or other form of abuse, but also to such things as alcoholism, misogyny and the seeking of power.

Properly understood, celibacy is a gift, and it must be seriously questioned whether it is possible to institutionalise a free gift of God in the way the Catholic Church has by the law of celibacy. If obligatory celibacy is to continue, it is essential that authorities should know far more about the lived reality of celibacy in the lives of priests and religious. Concerning the response to abuse, it seems obvious that celibate males will not respond to the abuse of children with the instinctive fierceness and passion of people who have their own children, so celibacy has also contributed to the poor response.

6. Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

Far too often orthodoxy (right beliefs) has been put before orthopraxis (right actions). If a priest is loyal to all papal teachings, his moral "mistakes" can easily be forgiven. But if he is not loyal to even one teaching, no amount of good actions will redeem him. A paedophile priest can be forgiven, but not someone who is unsound on contraception or the ordination of women.

This, too, has been part of the unhealthy culture. It reflects the unhealthy idea that faith is intellectual assent to propositions rather than a response of my whole being to God's love. We need to remember that Jesus said, "By this shall all know that you are my disciples that you love one another." and not "that you all recite the same Creed."

7. The Mystique of the Priesthood

"Every high priest chosen from among human beings is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf ..." (Hebrews 5:1).

The Greek text says only that one human being exactly like all the others is chosen for the task of priesthood, but the Latin translation that was used from the time of St Jerome until just a few years ago said *assumptus*, "taken up," and from this developed a mystique of the priesthood (and to a lesser extent of religious life) as "taken up" above other human beings.

Countless Catholic people have experienced this attitude in priests. It is exactly the kind of unhealthy idea that can contribute to abuse, and sexuality is only one of the ways in which it can make priests or religious think that they are special, unlike other human beings and not subject to the restrictions that bind others.

The privileges of this mystique will always be attractive to many inadequate personalities. It also gives priests and religious privileged access to minors and a powerful spiritual authority over them, making it so much easier to abuse.

It is never easy to change an *ethos* or mystique, but this one must change, for it denies the essential humanity of the priest or religious, and so establishes a series of false relationships at the heart of the community. Priests and religious are ordinary

human beings. This ought to be a most obvious statement, but authorities, priests, religious and Catholic people all have much work to do in this field.

I find that, wherever there are priests or religious trying to climb down from their pedestal, there are always, not only church authorities, but also many Catholic people insisting that they climb right back up again. There is a most dangerous insistence that priests and religious must be perfect or, since they can't achieve that, at least appear to be perfect. An extraordinary number of people believe the naive idea that "Priests and religious are celibate, so they can't really have sexual desires and feelings the way the rest of us do."

8. Professionalism

Over several decades there has been a strong move towards greater professionalism in most fields of human activity, but priests and religious have limped a long way behind. Their attitude has been one symptom of the idea of being above other human beings and so not needing the assistance and controls that others do.

In the light of all that has happened, there is a crying need that priests and religious should rapidly catch up with the wider society in this field of being truly professional in all they do. Among the elements that need serious and immediate consideration are:

- better selection processes of candidates, with a selection panel wider than just clerics, and with full use of a psychological assessment;
- a training that places as much emphasis on human development as on religious and priestly development, for you simply cannot have a good priest who is not first a good human being;
- a proper professional appraisal every five or six years, with the community participating in commenting on all aspects of the work of the priest or religious, including any signs of harmful or dangerous activity;
- a spiritual director;
- a supervisor with whom priests or religious can discuss their work and how they have dealt with problematic situations;
- in-service training, with promotion or renewal of an appointment (for instance, as parish priest) dependent on regular attendance;
- a code of conduct that sets out expected and acceptable modes of conduct in various circumstances;
- a form of dress (such as a distinctive tie) that serves to identify the priest or religious but is in conformity with modern usage and does not serve to stress their "otherness" from ordinary people;
- attention to living conditions such that a healthy emotional life is facilitated.

A further consideration needs to be added. It is not healthy that any group of people should believe that they have a job for life no matter what they do. The Code of Canon Law makes provision for the removal of a parish priest when his ministry "has for some reason become harmful or at least ineffective, even though this occurs

without any serious fault on his part." In the same way, there needs to be provision for the removal from priesthood or religious life altogether of the person who, even without fault, has shown a radical unsuitability for that life.

Indeed, there can be serious scandal in keeping such a person within the priesthood or religious life. Yes, there would need to be stringent safeguards to prevent injustice, but the good of the people must come first.

9. A Pope Who Can't Admit Mistakes

In theory, infallibility covers only a very restricted number of teachings solemnly proclaimed by the pope. In practice, the mantle of infallibility extends to cover many other matters as well. In a phenomenon known as "creeping infallibility," it extends to cover all teachings, laws and practices in which a significant amount of papal energy and prestige have been invested.

A classic example is the teaching on birth control. The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* lacked the technical requirements of infallibility. And yet so much papal energy and prestige have been invested in this teaching that for many people it is quite unthinkable that the pope could be wrong, for such an admission would seriously undermine all papal prestige, and that can never be allowed to happen. This makes it extremely difficult for a pope, or those whose own position is dependent on papal prestige, to admit that a pope has made a mistake on any serious matter.

In a particular way, whether it be a solemn dogma or an ordinary teaching or merely an ancient law or practice, it would be extraordinarily difficult for a pope of today to state that most of his predecessors had been wrong. This is a major force in preventing a pope from making admissions that there have been serious failures in the handling of abuse or from even allowing discussion of an issue such as mandatory celibacy for priests. If we are looking at the causes of the poor response to abuse, this one must be given a very high place.

10. Loyalty to a Silent Pope

Before ordination as a bishop, every candidate is required to take an oath of loyalty to the pope - not God, not the church, but the pope. Every bishop is meant to be "a pope's man," and bishops take this oath seriously.

If, when accusations of abuse first arose, the pope had made a public statement telling bishops to respond fearlessly and openly, always putting victims before the good name of the church, I believe it would have had a powerful effect. Accusations of abuse first came to public notice in the early 1980s, and for the following twenty years the pope was Pope John Paul II. Sadly, it must be said that he responded poorly. For twenty crucial years loyalty was loyalty to a largely silent pope, so silence and concealment became the response of "loyal" bishops.

If the pope had spoken out, I cannot, of course, guarantee that every bishop would have followed his lead. What I believe I can state with conviction is that the powerful loyalty to the pope of all bishops would have worked in favour of victims, whereas his silence meant that this loyalty worked against victims.

With authority goes responsibility. Pope John Paul many times claimed the authority, and he must accept the responsibility. The most basic task of a pope is surely to be the "rock" that holds the church together, and by his silence in the most serious moral crisis facing the church in our times the pope failed in this basic task. I felt that the demand was being made that I give my "submission of mind and will" to the silence as well as to the words of a pope, and in the matter of abuse I could not do this. The beatification of this silent pope has been another blow to all victims.

11. A Culture of Secrecy

Within Italy there is a powerful culture of *bella figura*, that is, of always presenting a good external appearance to the world. It goes back to Roman times and is very deeply entrenched. Those imbued with that culture would have serious difficulties in ignoring it and speaking openly about faults.

For many centuries, secrecy has been an important part of the culture of the Vatican. Wrong actions can easily be pardoned, and the unpardonable sin is that of making those wrong actions public. I speak here from personal experience, for a bishop guilty of the sexual abuse of an adult female was actually promoted while I was rebuked for criticising the Vatican's handling of the matter.

The Acts of the Apostles show that Peter, the first pope, was not above criticism and had to answer to the church for his actions (11:1-18). Today, on the contrary, the pope is held to be above criticism, is not answerable to the church and must be protected and defended in every way possible. This culture of obsessive secrecy has been a powerful factor in the mishandling of abuse.

It is a sad fact that, if the entire church has been slow to respond properly to abuse, the slowest part of all has been its central bureaucracy. In being so defensive, blaming the media, regarding the fairness of the way the church has been treated as the central issue, protesting that the church is better than other organisations that have got off lightly, defending the pope at all costs and dissociating the church from wrongdoers within it, various members of that bureaucracy have shown that they have missed what truly matters.

12. The Sense of the Faithful

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium*, that instinctive sensitivity and power of discernment that the members of the church collectively possess in matters of faith and morals. It is surely simple fact that the People of God as a whole would never have got us into the mess we are in, for their *sensus fidei* would have insisted on a far more rigorous and, dare I say it, Christian

response. It is their children who have been abused and it is they who have had their faith weakened or destroyed. They have even, in one way or another, had to pay for the mess. The pope and the bishops have lost credibility and it is only the People of God who can restore it to them.

If the church is to move forwards, these painful lessons must be learned, for this is an issue on which to leave out the People of God has been positively suicidal.

It will be seen that most of the factors I have mentioned largely find their origin in the first, the angry god. A beautiful paragraph in a papal document about God's love will not be enough, and it will take immense effort to eradicate the angry god from all aspects of the church. Ultimately, the church cannot think itself out of the angry god, for the change can come only from the lived experience of God's love.

How much individuals are affected by the factors I have mentioned will vary greatly from one person to the next. Not even all of the factors considered together take away responsibility from the individual.

I am always conscious of the saying of John Henry Newman, "There is nothing on this earth so ugly as the Catholic Church, and nothing so beautiful." Despite all the ugliness, there is also great beauty, and I would never wish to abandon that beauty. There is still a long way to go before we fully understand all the causal factors involved in regressive paedophilia in priests and religious.

We must not wait for convincing scientific proof that the particular factors I have mentioned have in fact contributed to either abuse or the poor response but, because they are unhealthy, remove them now. If there were a concerted attack on these factors - for instance, through a council - the church would at long last be seen to be truly confronting abuse.

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