

A Work of Mercy
Developing a Different Paradigm for
Addressing the Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Roman Catholic Church
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Introduction

I come here as a pilgrim. I am very aware that my experiences in this area are limited and that my understanding as well as my work is imperfect. The time we have available will not allow me to say everything that could be said or even needs to be said; and I cannot claim to speak for anyone or any group other than myself. This is a personal reflection and not a dissertation. However, I hope that it can be part of a prayerful and respectful ongoing dialog that furthers the church's mission of healing, reconciliation, and justice.

It is now roughly a quarter century since the crisis involving the sexual abuse of children and teens by priests and religious became a shockingly and then depressingly regular part of the life of the church.

Most of us know the statistics: allegations made and substantiated against thousands of offenders; even thousands more victims and survivors; many thousands of pages and hours of media coverage; millions of children and adults in the church with safe environment and abuse prevention training; and billions of dollars spent.

According to the *2009 Survey of Allegations and Costs* prepared for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)¹ of the \$120 million that was spent by the church in 2009 responding to credible allegations of sexual abuse, over \$96 million was spent on or as a result of litigation—settlements and legal fees—and less than \$24 million was spent on everything else. An additional \$22.2 million was spent on efforts to prevent the sexual abuse of children. For a church that has healing and reconciliation at the core of our mission, this over-reliance on litigation to resolve allegations and help victims and survivors should strike us as odd and perhaps even a scandal and a sign of failure. Is there an alternative?

I would like to offer a different paradigm or framework to achieve deeper and longer-lasting justice, healing, and reconciliation, to make the church a safer place for children and teens, and to help us become truer to our mission. This framework is already part of our Catholic tradition: the Spiritual Works of Mercy. Many Catholics are more familiar with the Corporal Works of Mercy, as they are based in large part on Jesus' admonition in Matthew 25:31-46. These include: giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty; clothing the naked; sheltering the homeless; visiting people who are sick or imprisoned; and burying the dead.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy are less well-known but just as integral to the church's mission and our lives as Christians: comforting the sorrowful; admonishing the

sinner; instructing the ignorant; counseling the doubtful; bearing wrongs patiently; forgiving all injuries; and praying for the living and the dead. There are many elements of the church's efforts to address the varied dimensions of the sexual abuse crisis that can fit within this paradigm; but adopting it will also challenge us to adopt some new attitudes and undertake some new initiatives. It will also call on us to take some risks.

Comfort the Sorrowful—Help victims and survivors of abuse to heal.

The first duty that the church has in addressing the issue of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and religious is to assist the victims and survivors, particularly those persons (along with their families) who have been directly harmed. They are the primary victims.

Each person experiences and deals with a trauma like sexual abuse differently. Recovery can be a lifetime process. Because of the diversity and uniqueness of the harm, we need to patiently listen to people's stories and walk with them in the ways that *they* need. This requires time, flexibility, and creativity.

It is also important to recognize that those who have come forward to date are likely only a fraction of those who have been harmed. This is a painful dimension that we must accept: there is no way that the church will be able to completely "move on" or put this painful part of our history behind us. The nature of the harm militates against it. It should spur our efforts to create a safe and hospitable environment for those people who will continue to come forward.

Admonish the Sinner—Hold offenders accountable.

A big challenge facing the church today is the effective supervision of priests and religious who have abused minors. Those subject to the criminal justice system are put under the supervision of the state and are subject to regular reporting, public disclosure of their location, limitations on where they can live, etc.

However, few of the priests and religious who have sexually abused minors in the past are likely to be arrested, prosecuted, or convicted for their crimes. Though they are barred from public ministry, and some may have also been dismissed from the clerical state or from their religious communities or dispensed from their vows, others are still considered part of their respective dioceses or orders. How can they be effectively supervised, and how can their risks of re-offending be minimized?

One key to effective supervision is a proper assessment of the risk to re-offend. This has historically been difficult, but newer behavior-based tools have improved this process. An effective supervision and safety plan begins with thorough, evidence-based, professional assessment. Writing a supervision and safety plan is one thing; following it and monitoring compliance are even more critical...and challenging. The Dallas *Norms* encourage priest offenders who have not been dismissed from the clerical

state but who are otherwise banned from public ministry or publicly identifying themselves as priests to “lead a life of prayer and penance.”²

One significant unmet need in the church is to create more communities of true prayer and penance, accountability and rehabilitation for offenders. The mission of such communities would be to not only prevent their members from re-offending but to also engage them in the positive work of repairing the harm that they have done in the ways that they are able.

Instruct the Ignorant—Bring light to drive away the darkness and fear.

Although the crisis of sexual abuse by priests and religious in the church has brought with it a host of losses and burdens, it has also produced elements of grace. One such grace has been a greater awareness of sexual and other forms of abuse both within the church and in the wider community. According to the USCCB’s *2009 Survey of Allegations and Costs*, nearly 7 million children, teens, and adults in parishes, schools and other ministries received safe environment training that year, along with priests, deacons and candidates for ordination.³

Two keys to making these prevention programs effective are repetition and reinforcement. This training needs to become less of an event and more fully integrated into the formation that people receive. If it is no more than a box that needs to be checked off for an audit or accreditation, then the church will have wasted an opportunity.

As a church we will also need to deal more honestly, openly, and humbly with issues of human sexuality; but our efforts to effectively address the problem of sexual abuse by clergy are destined to fail if we focus solely on the grave misuse of the gift of sexuality. We also need to address the more fundamental issues of clericalism and the abuse of power.

Clericalism by definition is a form of elitism. This sense of elitism is cultivated and reinforced by the distinctive education and formation, dress, and titles that priests and religious receive, as well as the reservation of particular offices and roles. Elitism, of course, is not unique to the church. It is a hallmark of a diverse array of organizations and institutions, including the military, corporations, and government. It is also a strong force. Its gravitational pull can draw leaders into a tighter and tighter circle, narrowing their vision, creating greater incentives for self-preservation and promotion rather than service, inculcating a sense of privilege, and aligning their interests with other elites and away from those whom they have been called to serve.

Elitism can lead to a distorted sense of entitlement, the assumption that one is not bound by the rules that govern everyone else, and that other people (even the vulnerable) exist to serve one’s own needs. It can lead to a whole range of abuses, including sexual abuse. Our church needs a strong and committed laity to push back

against clericalism and demand higher degrees of accountability from priests and religious, especially those of us who are in positions of authority.

We cannot forget that it is the poor and crucified Christ, the one who came to serve and not to be served, who emptied himself for our sake, who is the only head of the church. He calls us to be a church that is more honest, self-critical, open to reform, humble, and changing for the better.

Counsel the Doubtful—Help to restore trust and deepen understanding.

One significant challenge in educating the public and the media about the church's responses to the sexual abuse of minors by priests and religious has been to understand not only what was done at certain points but also *why* it was done. Dr. Monica Applewhite, a noted expert in the area of prevention and response to the sexual abuse of children, has written that, "In examining allegations of sexual abuse and how they were handled in the past, there is a temptation to apply our current standards and knowledge to judge decisions and actions that were taken long ago."⁴ At the same time, where poor decisions and other mistakes have been made it is critical to learn from them and make the changes needed to avoid repeating them.

It is hard for any group of people, including professionals and religious organizations, to police themselves. There is a desire to protect the integrity and public image of the profession or vocation and a tendency to identify more strongly with and protect those within it, even at the expense of those it is supposed to serve. I am coming to the conclusion that it is better for the church and the public to take the primary responsibility and the power of preventing and effectively responding to sexual abuse and other abuses of power out of the hands of the clergy—priests, bishops, and religious superiors—and put them more firmly in the hands of more independent groups and organizations led and controlled by the laity.

This would enable the church to draw from the gifts and competencies of our well-educated and professional Catholic laity and not put the onus on bishops and religious superiors to use gifts and skills that they may not have. It may be humbling and even threatening but it could also be liberating. It would enable those of us who are ordained to devote more time and energy to the work we were actually formed and trained to do.

Bear Wrongs Patiently—Encourage healing in the body of Christ.

While it is necessary to make the support and healing of victims and survivors of sexual abuse by clergy and religious a pastoral priority in the church, it is also important to remember that the crisis has also created an entire class of what might be called secondary victims or survivors. Many Catholics have seen their faith in the church and its leaders shaken. Some have left the church in frustration or disgust.

A number of dioceses have had to eliminate offices and programs and lay off dedicated employees. People have lost access to services because of the financial impacts of the crisis. Non-offender priests and religious are troubled by a sense of collective shame or guilt by association. People who work with victims and survivors of abuse sometimes find themselves emotionally and spiritually burnt-out.

Bishops and religious superiors need healing, too. It is easy to forget that they are very human and imperfect beings and pastors, trying to address what can be very complex, difficult, and emotionally charged situations that are rooted in events that often occurred decades before they assumed office. Another group that needs understanding and support are the small group of clergy who have been wrongly accused of sexually abusing minors. This is harder in practice than in theory. Once an allegation is made it is very difficult to make it (or the moral stain of it) disappear, even if it proves unfounded.

Finally, the church needs to provide support and opportunities for healing for those millions of members for whom the sexual abuse crisis has become a relentless source of pain, frustration, embarrassment, distraction, and confusion. Yet each Sunday morning many still head out the door for Mass to hear the word of God and to be nourished by Christ's body and blood. How many pastors are aware of this? How many are prepared to deal with it?

Healing victims and survivors of sexual abuse must be a top priority; but there is a whole lot of other healing needed, too. There is a larger and more collective trauma that will take years, if not generations, for the church to heal. Recognizing the need, however, is the first step in addressing it.

Forgive All Injuries—Create opportunities for reconciliation.

One of the core elements of the church's mission is reconciliation. We follow one who reconciled the human and the divine, the sinner with the saved, male and female, slave and free, death and life. The central communal act of our faith, the Eucharist, includes both a Penitential Rite in which we celebrate our reconciliation with God and a Sign of Peace in which we celebrate our reconciliation with each other. One of our seven sacraments, the Sacrament of Penance, is intended to repair the ruptures in our relationships with God and the community that are the result of serious sin.

The sexual abuse of minors, particularly by adults who were supposed to nurture and care for them, is an extremely grave sin. How can these wounds be healed? The Sacrament of Penance offers us a model for healing and reconciliation. It includes five elements: (1) *Confession* (stating the sin); (2) *Contrition* (expressing sorrow for the sin); (3) *Penance* (repairing the harm caused by the sin as well as seeking to avoid it in the future); (4) *Absolution* (allowing the penitent to "move on" in a way that reinforces accountability and supports change); (5) *Satisfaction* (performing the penance).

Confession, it is said, is good for the soul. That belief was at the core of an open letter that was published last year by Fr. James Connell, a priest of the Archdiocese of

Milwaukee and the Vice Chancellor of the Archdiocese.⁵ In his letter, Fr. Connell called for a heightened level of transparency by dioceses and religious orders in addressing the issue of the sexual abuse by clergy.

Contrition, sorrow for what we have done and failed to do, is most frequently expressed in sincere, personal and public apologies. The church has seen many such expressions over the years of the sexual abuse crisis. The words that often assist a victim or survivor in beginning his or her journey of healing and reconciliation are: “I believe you. I’m sorry. How can I help?” Words must also be followed by action.

Penance requires efforts to repair the harm done by the sin and doing what is possible to prevent it from being repeated. Many of the things that we now take for granted in the church’s response to the sexual abuse crisis could be thought of as forms of penance. In addition to these concrete steps, symbolic actions might also help.

The church, for example, might consider adopting a patron saint for victims and survivors of sexual abuse. St. Charles Lwanga and companions, the 19th century Ugandan martyrs, were young men and boys who were killed by their king in large part because they resisted his abuse, claiming that their Christian faith would not allow them to consent to it. Religious superiors and bishops could also adopt some forms of public penance. While many who are in leadership today had little or nothing to do with decisions that were made by others in the past, we still have to deal with the consequences.

Absolution and *satisfaction* are interrelated and will demand time, thought, and effort. The engagement of the church in a process like this will require a role reversal of sorts, with bishops and clergy in the form of penitents and the laity in the church and the wider community serving as our confessors. It may be awkward at first; but it is necessary and, I believe, the right thing to do. Rebuilding trust is a long-term project.

Pray for the Living and the Dead—Remember, reflect, and renew.

On December 28, only days after Christmas, the church celebrates the Feast of the Holy Innocents, who were slaughtered by Herod’s troops as the Holy Family fled to Egypt, (Matthew 2:14-18). It is a reminder that even the coming of the Light of the World did not completely prevent people from succumbing to the works of darkness and the innocent suffering because of it.

From the beginning, the church has relied upon prayer to give voice to the suffering, healing to the broken-hearted, hope to the despairing, courage to the fearful, and a sense of gratitude to the troubled. The power of prayer can help us to work through this crisis just as surely as it has helped earlier generations of Christians to weather storms and use scandals as opportunities for reform.

Recently a group of priests in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee sponsored a series of prayer and healing services, opportunities for victims and survivors of sexual abuse,

their families, pastors and people in the pews to place the suffering, the dead, their loved ones and the community in the hands of God.⁶ They were powerful and positive experiences for those who participated.

Prayerfully remembering and coming to terms with the past also includes commending offenders to the mercy of God. It is tempting and perfectly understandable to want to curse them or attempt to erase their memories. But our faith invites us to overcome those instincts and to remember and pray for those brothers who committed such grievous sins. We may need to remember the good that they did even as we also acknowledge the evil. We do so not to sugarcoat the past but to live in the hope that “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Romans 5:20). We are all sinners; and we are called to trust in that grace, in the One who so generously gives it to us, and to extend that grace to others.

In addition, we need to pray for and encourage the many priests and religious who are striving to be faithful to their vows and in service to and with the people of God. Citing a survey in which over 90% of priests surveyed reported being happy in their vocations, Msgr. Steven Rossetti, who long led the St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland wrote in 2009: “The grace of God is flowing in and through our priests. Despite the travails of our day, and there are many, the vast majority of our priests are courageously embracing their crosses, living their priestly calling with fidelity, and coming to know the Source of true joy.”⁷ It is that same Source to which the church and each of us must turn again and again for inspiration and transformation.

Conclusion

The sexual abuse of children and teens by those who were entrusted with their care is a wound and a source of great anguish and shame in the body of Christ. It is likely to remain so for many years. It is seeded with sin and sorrow; and we pray and need to work so that those seeds can, with God’s grace, produce fruits of justice, peace, and conversion in a church that continues to grow, is always in need of reform, and moves through history as a pilgrim.

Adopting the Spiritual Works of Mercy as our foundation for addressing the issue of sexual abuse of children and teens within the church would be challenging—most cultural change is—but it is better than continuing to do only what we have been doing and expecting different results. That, as any person in a Twelve Step recovery program will tell you, is the definition of insanity.

—John Celichowski, OFM Cap.

**John Celichowski is a Capuchin friar, priest and Provincial Minister of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, based in Detroit.*

¹ Center for Applied Research of the Apostolate (CARA), *2009 Survey of Allegations and Costs, A Summary Report for the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (February 2010).

² *Id.*, *Essential Norms* 8.b.

³ See, Center for Applied Research of the Apostolate, *2009 Survey of Allegations and Costs*, at 24. The total of all priests, deacons, and candidates for ordination, educators, employees, volunteers and children trained was 7,397,114 with a mean percentage of 98.7% of those available to be trained.

⁴ Monica Applewhite, Ph.D., *Development of Organizational Standards of Care for Prevention and Response to Child Sexual Abuse: A Historical Analysis Using Research, Organizational and Public Policy Benchmarks*, at 29.

⁵ See. Fr. James Connell, *Church Has Moral Obligation to Reveal Truth in Sex Abuse Scandal*, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, January 6, 2011, <http://www.jsonline.com/news/opinion/113040799.html>

⁶ See, Tracy Rusch, "Vigils Aim to Heal the Hurt of Abuse Victims," Catholic Herald, July 22, 2010. <http://www.chnonline.org/news/local/9626-vigils-aim-to-heal-hurt-of-abuse-victims.html>

⁷ Stephen J. Rossetti, *Our Journey of Joy: Ten Steps to Priestly Holiness* (Ave Maria Press 2009), at 26.