

**The Clerical Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church – An Overview on  
Insights and Scholarship**

The clerical sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has been covered by a large number of scholars from a very diverse array of backgrounds and methodologies. The history of the individuals accused of sexual abuse with a connection to Loyola University Chicago cannot be properly understood without the broader context that they acted in. This essay presents the broad outlines of this background, as well as an overview of a variety of analyses that have emerged from the research on the crisis.

In the early 2000s the Catholic Church experienced an upset that shook its foundations. A court case in Boston against former priest John J. Geoghan and the related extensive reporting of the Boston Globe on this case revealed a pervasive pattern of child sexual abuse committed by Catholic clergy that had taken place over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century. The judge overseeing the case, Constance M. Sweeney, ordered thousands of documents unsealed. The Boston Globe's editors then turned these documents into a detailed series of reports. This ground breaking investigation revealed the extent of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> What emerged was a pattern of victims and survivors who when they revealed the crimes done to them to church superiors were frequently met with dismissal and denial and little if any action to curb the abuse by clergy members.

This pattern was found to also have repeatedly played out with the Jesuits at Loyola University Chicago: for example, when the Jesuits at Loyola University Chicago were informed of then-chair of the sociology department Thomas Gannon sexually

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<sup>1</sup> "Boston Globe / Spotlight / Abuse in the Catholic Church / The Geoghan Case," accessed January 17, 2022, <http://archive.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/geoghan/>.

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assaulting graduate students in the 1970s, they dismissed the allegations. The aggrieved graduate students then left the university, while their abuser remained on faculty well into the 1980s. He was then transferred to a position at Georgetown, without ever having been subjected to any form of disciplinary action.<sup>2</sup>

Church and order leaderships time after time chose to avoid scandal, to ignore the calls of the survivors of sexual abuse, and instead shielded the perpetrators, who in most cases were faced with very few—if any—consequences for their crimes. This behavior by Catholic leadership is one of the aggravating factors of the sexual abuse crisis that is plaguing the church and many of its related religious orders today still. Church and order superiors went to some considerable lengths in their efforts to insure that the institution avoided scandal. Archivist of the Boston diocese James O’Toole for example revealed that he found his own diocese kept a separate set of files for “problem priests” that were strictly separate from what even the official archivist was privy to.<sup>3</sup>

In the twenty years since the child sexual abuse crisis broke, many survivors have spoken out against their assailants, revealing how ubiquitous sexual abuse and child sexual abuse was in the Catholic Church and in institutions adjacent to it. What also emerged was that, at least in the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) was aware of a wide-spread problem with priests abusing minors since at least the 1980s, when Louisiana priest Gilbert Gauthe was the first Catholic priest sued by his victims’ families. Journalist and writer Michael D’Antonio found that even before the Gauthe case broke, American Bishops had a vague awareness of the prevalence of child

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<sup>2</sup> “Gannon Abused Minors, Adults Across 3 Institutions; Later Taught Sociology at GU,” March 15, 2019, <https://thehoya.com/gannon-abused-minors-adults-across-3-institutions-later-taught-sociology-gu/>.

<sup>3</sup> James M. O’Toole, “What Did I Know, and When Did I Know It?,” *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 2 (2016): 6.

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sexual abuse by clergy members, as they commissioned a study into priests' psycho-sexual development in 1972. The church hierarchy had an awareness that it inadvertently offered shelter to men with psychological and sexual problems.<sup>4</sup> But, as the research into the crisis has revealed, the leadership of both parishes and dioceses, as well as the leadership of Catholic religious orders time and again refused to face the crisis in their midst. The 2001 Gaughan cases' significance was that the judge refused to comply with the church's request to seal the court documents, which up to that point had been common practice in clerical child sexual abuse cases brought before secular courts. Another common practice was that the church and religious orders rather paid large sums in settlements than going to trial, as legal scholar Jo Renee Formicola found. As early as the 1990s the church had paid millions in settlements, long before the Gaughan case went to trial.<sup>5</sup>

Geoghan was in many ways exemplary of the way the church operated with sexually abusive priests: even though he had been repeatedly reported for child sexual abuse to his bishop, the only consequence the priest faced was that he was sent to therapy, put on sick leave, and then shuffled between therapy centers and parishes until his quiet laicization in 1998 after years of sexually abusing children.<sup>6</sup> Catholic leadership kept these issues secret, had court records sealed, issued gag orders to plaintiffs, and settled the cases out of court instead of going to trials, as sociologists Patricia Ewick and

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<sup>4</sup> Michael D'Antonio, *Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime, and the Era of Catholic Scandal*, 1st ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, StMartin's Press, 2013), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Jo Renee Formicola, *Clerical Sexual Abuse: How the Crisis Changed US Catholic Church-State Relations*, First edition., Palgrave Studies in Religion, Politics, and Policy (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 53.

<sup>6</sup> Formicola, *Clerical Sexual Abuse*, 48.

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Marc Steinberg found.<sup>7</sup> As legal scholar Mayo Moran stated, these issues were not limited to the United States either, unlike what church leadership in the Vatican kept insisting upon. Catholic clergymen engaging in widespread child sexual abuse was a phenomenon in the church around the globe. And measures by Church hierarchy to cover these issues up were equally an international phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Both the church and its orders engaged in a culture of denial, that permeated down into the laity. This was one of the more insidious aspects of the sexual abuse crisis, as historian Robert Orsi points out: due to the high status that priests enjoy in Catholic society, anyone accusing a priest of something as heinous as child sexual abuse makes themselves a target for derision and ostracism by their Catholic peers. Survivors of clerical sexual abuse were often shunned and made feeling guilty for even suggesting that a member of the clergy was capable of a crime such as this.<sup>9</sup>

In an attempt to better understand the sexual abuse crisis, the USCCB commissioned a study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice based on diocesan surveys. The report was based on official numbers of allegations and accusations of child sexual abuse made towards member of the Catholic clergy. While the report documents the pervasiveness of child sexual abuse in the church, the data that ultimately came out of the analysis needs to be approached with some crucial considerations in mind. The numbers included are based on publicly made allegations and accusations. Therefore, the data only does not reveal the true number of abused

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Ewick, *Beyond Betrayal: The Priest Sex Abuse Crisis, the Voice Of The Faithful, and the Process of Collective Identity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Mayo Moran, "Cardinal Sins: How the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis Changed Private Law," *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law* 21, no. 1 (2020 2019): 97.

<sup>9</sup> Robert A. Orsi, "What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?," in *Anthropology of Catholicism* (University of California Press, 2017), 287, <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520288423.003.0022>.

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children or abusive priests, but only the number of victims who publicly spoke out against their abusers. The report ultimately has the same problem of most data analyses have based on self-reporting: the data reveals who self-reports, not the actual number of instances. This means the data points towards certain trends, but is ultimately unreliable and not exhaustive. For example, as sociologist Marie Keenan pointed out, the John Jay report finds that about two thirds of abused children were teenage boys, and only a third of the victims girls. But this ultimately only reveals that two thirds of those victims reporting their abuse were boys. Keenan however also cites supporting empirical research in addition to the John Jay report that points to at least some veracity of these numbers. Apparently, a large number of Catholic priests believed that engaging in sexual behavior with boys or men would not violate their priestly vow of celibacy, while having sex with girls or women was in contrast believed to be the ultimate sin.<sup>10</sup>

That a large number of Catholic priests engaged in sexually abusive behavior towards teenagers and children made theologians, sociologists, criminologists, and psychologists all wonder what drove this behavior. Another finding from the John Jay report was that the overwhelming majority of priests that were accused of child sexual abuse did not seem to fit the profile of a pathological pedophile. Most of the abusive priests had access to children early on in their careers, however only began engaging in sexually abusive behavior years, or sometimes even decades after their ordination. This led many researchers to arrive at the conclusion that these priests were in fact not driven by a sexual attraction to children.<sup>11</sup> However this, too, is an issue that needs to be

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<sup>10</sup> Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Keenan, 14.

approached and evaluated carefully. The impression that most sexually abusive Catholic priests only began engaging in child sexual abuse late in their careers and only had few victims could be indicative of gaps in reporting.

However so far, the John Jay report and other, similar studies deliver the most readily available numbers on the sexual abuse crisis, and additional research has been conducted to further ensure that the findings that these studies point to are in fact tracing actual trends. These numbers are what current scholarship on the child sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is by and large based on and what scholars and researchers writing about the issue have to work with. Psychologist John C. Gonsiorek suggests comparing data on child sexual abuse in the church with similar data from other helping professions. He, however, also urges scholars to caution due to the reasons mentioned above, stating that the reported numbers and percentages both of sexual abuse victims and self-reported pedophiles in the church are likely “floors, not ceilings,” while going on to state that “credible accusations are carefully considered judgements, not facts.”<sup>12</sup> Legal scholars from John Jay College delved deeper into the issue and found that the explanation for the gender disparity found in the records in fact indicates not a preference for boys, but simply that the sexually abusive priests had more ready access to males rather than females, that the explanation for the disparity is neither preference nor a gap in data, but simply a matter of opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John C. Gonsiorek, “The Interplay of Psychological and Institutional Factors in Sexual Abuse by Roman Catholic Clergy,” in *Clergy Sexual Abuse: Social Science Perspectives* (Boston, UNITED STATES: Northeastern University Press, 2013), 37, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/luc/detail.action?docID=1093573>.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Holt and Christina Massey, “Sexual Preference or Opportunity: An Examination of Situational Factors by Gender of Victims of Clergy Abuse,” *Sexual Abuse* 25, no. 6 (December 1, 2013): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063211425690>.

What the statistical data on the abuse crisis reveals about the perpetrators themselves seems generally more reliable than what the surveys and accumulated accusations reveal about the victims. Analysis reveals patterns that outline trends in who the priests that sexually abused children were. One significant insight gained from studies like the John Jay report is that the abuse crisis was centered on a cohort of priests born between 1920 and 1949, ordained to priesthood between 1950 and 1969. This cohort represents the overwhelming bulk of the accused priests. There were abusive priests on either side of this cohort, but the majority of perpetrators were born and ordained in these aforementioned time periods. Records appear to indicate that prior to the 1950s child sexual abuse by Catholic priests was by far not as prevalent as in the roughly thirty to forty year period following.<sup>14</sup> Again, this might simply be due to a lack of reporting and therefore only a gap in data. The reasons for this clustering are somewhat difficult to assess. Theologian and priest Donald Cozzens presents the possibility that this specific cohort of priest was socialized and went through seminary in an environment that was strongly influenced by Pope Pius X. 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (On the Errors of the Modernists), in which the pope stated that the church is unchanging and eternal and that church doctrine must not be altered to adhere to changing whims of the time. This teaching massively changed the way Catholic priestly education was conducted in the following decades and the way that seminaries operated. According to Cozzens, the encyclical's consequence was a reduction of seminarian education away from academic instruction that at the same time introduced in the priests a sense of superiority – a gateway to clericalism – that

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph P. Chinnici, *When Values Collide: The Catholic Church, Sexual Abuse, and the Challenges of Leadership* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2010), 15.

reduced priesthood to an overpowering voice of authority. This paradigm changed only with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which coincided with the tail-end of the abusive cohort of priests found in the John Jay reports.<sup>15</sup>

A closely related dynamic which Cozzen's explanation points to is indeed the concept of clericalism. Religious scholars, theologians, and historians have incorporated this concept in their analytic frameworks in attempts to understand the dynamics of the child sexual abuse crisis. Clericalism is essentially the idea that Catholic priests are inherently better human beings than laymen, because of an understanding that the priesthood is a calling from God. Due to this calling and their position within the church clergy is perceived as being closer to the divine than regular people. The literature broadly states that clericalism as the dominant understanding and self-understanding of Catholic priests was diminished by the reforms brought about in Vatican II in the 1960s. But the same literature also stresses that, while diminished, clericalism is still thriving in the church today. Historian Garth Abraham cites Pope Pius XIII who in 1958 still stated that in his view, priests are unquestionable nobler beings than laymen, and that effectively every priest was "another Christ," sharing in the divine power.<sup>16</sup> Many scholars, including Pope Francis himself, regard this form of clericalism as the core reason for the child sexual abuse crisis. Priests regarded themselves as better than laypeople, which eventually resulted in them transgressing. But also the laity was struck with clericalism, perceiving priests as higher and better human beings than they themselves were. This then resulted in the laity disregarding any reports that a priest

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<sup>15</sup> Donald B. Cozzens, *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Garth Abraham, "Clericalism and the Need for Reform of the Post-Tridentine Model for the Formation of Seminarians," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 12, no. 2 (July 2, 2020): 206–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2020.1810999>.



could have done anything wrong. Clericalism was also an issue for victims, who internalized this disposition towards the clergy. All of this resulted in laity often turning against victims of priestly sexual abuse, essentially accusing the survivors of seeking to damage the reputation of godly men, of being opposed to the Church, and of having brought on the things that happened to them themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Clericalism then was also largely abandoned as official church doctrine with the reforms of Vatican II. However the Catholic Church is an ancient and cumbersomely slow-reacting institution, so the implementation of these reforms took time. What took even longer was for this paradigm shift to truly filter through the ranks of the church. For priests to no longer either consider themselves or to be considered a superior class by the laity took time. Superiors who were educated and socialized under the previous paradigm had their thoughts and actions still deeply inflected by the older teachings. This serves as one explanation as to why the main cohort of abusers' tail end was not immediately after Vatican II, but only some years after the council concluded. Both laity and clergy required time to accept and internalize the change in dynamics, and in many places in the global church this change still has not quite taken hold today.<sup>18</sup>

The abuse crisis had two overarching components. One was the abusive priests themselves, the other side was the church's and the various religious orders' hierarchy that over decades systematically covered up the abuse committed by their clergy. A large part of how Catholic hierarchy acted in this regard was the way that the Church and the orders saw their place in the world. According to Catholic Church's understanding of itself, the members of the Church are bound not by secular law, but by the separate and

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<sup>17</sup> Orsi, "What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?," 287.

<sup>18</sup> Seitz, John C., "Secrecy, Sex Abuse, and the Practice of Priesthood," in *Forthcoming*, 2021, 10.

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ancient law of the church referred to as Canon Law. Canon Law has its own lawyers and often vastly different implications than the secular laws of the nation states in which the church members reside. If a bishop became aware that one of his priests was sexually abusing children, his first reaction would not be to contact the secular authorities, who in this view had no say in this matter. Since the offender was a clergyman, the responsible legal authority was the Catholic Church, not the police or secular courts. This was in accordance with the way the Catholic Church by and large regarded itself in these matters since the nineteenth century—explicitly above state and civil matters, untouchable by secular rule. Therefore in this instance the church superiors had to apply Canon Law. And Canon Law regards the sexual abuse of children not as a crime, but as a sin. And a sin in this case against oneself – the perpetrator – rather than an offense against the victim. As legal scholar Jo Renee Formicola stated, the church understood the child sexual abuse that its members were guilty of not in terms of criminal offenses but only in terms of sin. She also found that bishops were not homogenous in their application and interpretation of canon law, and often times sought ways to circumvent the application of the law upon their transgressive subordinates.<sup>19</sup>

These circumventions were not necessarily sought in order to spare individuals however, but often served the purpose to deny and ignore the broader issue of sexually abusive clergy existing in the first place. Many bishops did this simply because their first instinct when confronted with such transgressions was to shield the institution—the parish, the diocese, and the church itself—from damage. A secondary function was to fend off the impression that the individual bishops themselves failed to prevent the

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<sup>19</sup> Formicola, *Clerical Sexual Abuse*, 118.

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harm done in their parishes. The bishops—as well as the superiors of religious orders—acted in their function as leaders within their institutions of faith, and failed as such. As Mary Keenan pointed out, this was also much due to how little power larger governing bodies have inside the church and the orders, with smaller compartments of the larger organization and the leaders of these compartments enjoying a relatively high amount of authority.<sup>20</sup> The USCCB for example refused to hold itself accountable even in 2002, with the overall sentiment that emerged from a conference organized in reaction to the Gaughan case being that bishops should not be coerced to speak out against their priests in any way, since such a coercion would be an encroachment upon the bishopric autonomy.<sup>21</sup>

As such, the sexual abuse crisis was and is a crisis at the heart of the Catholic Church and a crisis of- and within Catholicism. This comes from where the abuse took place, who enacted it, the general socio-cultural circumstances the abuse happened within, as well who the victims were. In many cases, such as Donald McGuire, as well as John Powell, abusive priests used the holy sacrament of confession and the seclusion and secrecy that is inherent in the act of Catholic confession specifically as a cover for sexual abuse. Through their abuse these men tainted the faith and the locales of faith for the believers they victimized. These circumstances are what Robert Orsi described as what really made this a thoroughly Catholic crisis: from the abusive priests using the faith to find their victims, to the bishops covering the abuse up to protect the church, to the laity staying silent in the face of the abuse due to its belief in priests being infallible,

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<sup>20</sup> Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Formicola, *Clerical Sexual Abuse*, 114.

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and inherently incapable of doing wrong, the sexual abuse crisis grew out of the Catholic faith and suffused it thoroughly.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Orsi, "What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?," 286.