

#CHURCHTOO: VIOLENCE, RESISTANCE, TRANSFORMATION, AND THE  
CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS – SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Lisa Fullam, Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara  
Moderator: Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, Chicago Theological Union  
Presenters: Melanie Barrett, University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary  
Lisa Fullam, Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara  
David Cloutier, The Catholic University of America

This session gathered three lay moral theologians, all of whom teach seminarians, to offer different perspectives on the current clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Church, with special attention paid to what can be done to improve seminary formation.

Melanie Barrett's paper, "Restoring our Christ-Centered Vision: The Seminary as Contemporary Bethsaida," began by reviewing the traumatic events of the past year. Seminarians, she reported, returned to campus discouraged, and found in their pastoral assignments an (understandable) suspicion from laity weary of the stream of scandals.

While Barrett indicated that structural reforms are necessary, she also noted that the phenomenon of abuse of power, including sexual abuses, occur in all other human institutions. Targeting only "clerical" structures, and replacing them with lay leadership, seems to miss something. Therefore, she turned her specific focus to an ethics of virtue for priestly formation. Intellectual/moral formation should emphasize the virtuous imitation of Christ, stressing the ways in which "sacrificial love for the people" is the core image for ministry, especially Jesus' humility as the good shepherd, who willingly lays down his life to protect his sheep. One's sexual desires should be integrated—rather than suppressed—in the service of love for one's spiritual sons and daughters. Celibate chastity functions as a charism in which self-possession frees the priest for greater self-gift. Spiritual formation aims to deepen love for God and for the people of God, culminating in the virtuous capacity to sacrifice one's own comforts, prestige, and worldly power. The model of formation places spiritual fatherhood at the core of priestly identity, suggesting appropriate forms of humble but real leadership seen in analogies with how a loving father guides, respects, and cares for his children.

Lisa Fullam's paper, "Clericalism as Social Sin," noted that Pope Francis has named clericalism as an aberration that needs to be rooted out, but Fullam said that clericalism is intrinsic to official Church teaching about priesthood. After tracing some of the frankly clericalist language in Church documents on priesthood and priestly formation, Fullam noted that the wonder isn't that some priests *are* clericalist, but rather that they aren't *all* clericalist.

Clericalism is a social sin rooted in the unjust structure of official theology of orders, in which priests are set above and apart from laity. Kenneth Himes defines social sin as describing social ills "which have a systemic quality about them" because they are "embedded in a pattern of societal organization and cultural understanding." The harm of clericalism is twofold: first, the direct harm done when clericalism warps right relationships between priests and laity, but more insidiously when it warps the self-understandings of priests and laity alike, thus providing an obstacle to flourishing for all of us. Clericalism creates what Bernard Haring called "value-blindness," in which corrupted and hurtful structures make acts of oppression and injustice seem

reasonable or natural. Employing Katie Grimes' term "corporate vice," Fullam emphasized the communal and embodied nature of clericalism manifested in practices like separate training for seminarians apart from others, resplendent clerical garb for Mass, and mandatory clerical celibacy, which establishes a literal separation of clerical bodies from all others. Clericalism is embodied in and a social corruption of the church, more a vice of the whole community than a vice merely of the occasional "bad apple."

Fullam closed with "action points" for a more rigorous rooting-out of clericalism: the admission of lay women and men as equal students to those anticipating ordination, the rejection of practices embodying the "apart and above" narrative that infests current theologies (e.g. "ontological change" language, the address "father," speaking of "Church leadership" as "the Church"), and practices of restorative justice in which priests and laity can speak openly and truthfully to the other, based in a common commitment to the healing of the community.

David Cloutier's presentation, "Holy Agents, Holy Structures? Thinking Through Transformation in the Education of Priests," applied the tools of critical realist sociology to the abuse crisis. He observed that Barrett and Fullam offered helpful but partial analyses, focusing on agent formation and structures, respectively. Critical realist sociology explains social change by maintaining that agents and structures are *both* causal, but in different ways. Only agents act—structures like "clericalism" cannot "do" anything—but agents always act within pre-existing *positions* that shape their options through various restrictions, enablements, and opportunities.

Given the focus of the panel, Cloutier focused especially on the ways in which seminarians are shaped in clerical structures that incentivize certain problematic relationships *within* the clerical class. To understand the abuse crisis, especially the cover-ups, it is not sufficient to identify the position of clergy in relationship to laypersons. Cloutier highlighted a number of structural dynamics in the seminary system, such as disincentives for seminary formators to identify problems to sending bishops, that affect formation. He also explained that the clerical class seems to function in terms of a "court patronage" model, where exchanging favors and gaining the support of powerful patrons can often override more "meritocratic" structures that reward actual priestly effectiveness and holiness. Finally, Cloutier noted that, in terms of agent formation, numerous clerics in the current scandals appear to have difficulty living out the genuine vision of Christian judgment and forgiveness, which is necessarily a key difference in how the church will handle abuse scandals compared to secular organizations. In conclusion, he suggested that, beyond the obvious problems of unaccountable power, seminaries pay attention to micro-structural changes that encourage relationships of trust, openness, and mutual fraternity among priests, as well as work against a culture of interlocked secrecy that discourages reasonable public candor when encountering failures within the church.

A vigorous discussion followed the papers. Many participants praised various emphases in the papers. Special attention was given to the ways in which episcopal office and episcopal authority presented special challenges.

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