

THEOLOGY, SEXUALITY, AND JUSTICE: NEW FRONTIERS – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Theology, Sexuality, and Justice: New Frontiers  
Convener: Megan K. McCabe, Gonzaga University  
Moderator: Todd Walatka, University of Notre Dame  
Presenter: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College  
Respondents: Shawnee Marie Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary University  
Cristina Lledo Gomez, Charles Sturt University

Lisa Cahill’s paper entitled “Sexual Violence against Women and Children: How is Another World Possible?,” analyzed the clergy sexual abuse crisis in light of the broader context of sexual abuse in society disproportionately harming women and children. Two features are present in nonreligious abuse but are given a “religious spin” in the context of Catholic abuse. First, a culture of “hegemonic masculinity” prescribes that “masculine” men possess traits of power, strength, independence, authority, risk-taking, and suppression of pain and emotions of vulnerability and distress. In religious institutions, male sexual dominance is mediated and reinforced by norms of gender conformity and sexual purity endowed with transcendent value. The second feature is a closed, hierarchical, male institution, which, in the religious case, grants unique prerogatives and authority to male religious leadership, giving rise to both clericalism and hierarchicalism. Male precedence is uniquely strong for designated religious leaders, yielding a formation of power often termed clericalism. Hierarchicalism, defined by James Keenan, is a regime of episcopal formation that involves an elite induction track for future bishops, as well as “greater power and greater networking abilities than clerical culture.” Clericalism and hierarchicalism have allowed for both the coverup of abuse and re-circulation of abusers, resulting in the ongoing multiplication of victims. A third factor is unique to religious traditions, especially Roman Catholicism. Mandatory celibacy creates the paradox of men whose elite status depends on refraining from sex, whereas the script of hegemonic masculinity associates masculinity with sexual dominance. Celibacy participates in creating elite status for clergy, but is not alone enough to give rise to sexual abuse.

Australian social scientist Jane Anderson argues that within the rigidly structured ecclesial bureaucracy, with subordinate members dependent on recognition and favor from the top, it is easy for both gay and straight priests to feel powerless, a contradiction of the masculine ideal to which they have been socialized. Catholic institutional practices intended to groom young boys for admission to the clerical cadre also expose them to the predation of priests undergoing crises of status and priestly identity. Anderson believes that some clergy—sexually immature, lonely, and often inebriated—exploit vulnerable targets who enable them to reassert dominance and regain power through sexual control. However, this dynamic does not explain the deliberate, systematic behavior of the rings of abusive priests uncovered in the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report. This behavior is not a series of “mistakes” by poorly formed clergy. It is the work of inveterate predators protected and perpetuated by hierarchicalism, and by the silencing of would-be whistle-blowers who cannot imagine a life beyond the clerical system that holds their vocations hostage.

Change requires the conversion of the clerical and episcopal hierarchy. Rulings by Pope Francis or Vatican congregations will not change clericalist and abusive cultures at local levels unless there is “buy-in” from those charged with implementation. If episcopal leaders take ownership of the crisis, then change might be possible. However, the 2016 directive from Pope Francis to remove negligent bishops has not been implemented and there is no standard requirement to report abuse to legal authorities. Finally, no change is possible without the conversion and participation of the laity. Many excellent proposals for reform exist. But a “movement mindset” is needed to change a culture of acceptance to a culture of noncompliance. US Catholics already have a “movement mindset” around the unacceptability of both clericalism and child sexual abuse. But there will not be an institutional impact if we exit the church or stay but lose attention and do not follow through with specific actionable demands.

Shawnee Daniels-Sykes argued that formal institutional structures in the Catholic Church are not accountable to the laity or civil law, and as a result the crisis will persist and continue to be responded to pitifully. She called directly for the “movement mindset” proposed by Cahill. Despite the public presence of the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements, they have not shaped the church in a major way. Yet, the church has a huge blind spot when it comes to the critical need to address sexual and racial violence. A hashtag movement for the church, #WeThePeopleOfGodMatter, is one way to foster a movement mindset. #WeThePeopleOfGodMatter in the Roman Catholic Church, in order follow the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, and champion sexual and racial justice that embraces and protects the dignity and worth of all human beings. #WeThePeopleOfGodMatter because Jesus’ countercultural life, crucifixion, death, and resurrection model a necessary way to ensure tranquility in the universal Catholic Church, mandate ongoing common litigation, and promote the defrocking and laicization of all priests, bishops, and cardinals found guilty of sexual violence so as to bring about sexual, racial, ecclesial, and social justice.

Cristina Lledo Gomez opened her response with a statement acknowledging the original inhabitants of the land on which we met. She engaged Cahill’s argument, as she offered a two-fold response. First, she called to broaden our vision of safeguarding our churches. It is not only young people that need protecting but also vulnerable adults who can potentially suffer a re-traumatization in our ecclesial spaces. Such vulnerable adults may be migrant women experiencing the double bind of domestic violence and settling into a new country that has been colonized and carries the colonial mentality, the LGBTIQ community, and people who have experienced child sexual, emotional or physical abuse in their own homes. Second, no response is adequate without attention paid to our own daily-conversion. We need to accept our own capacity to be violent or abuse others. Our own conversion to peace and to integral human development provides the solid foundation from which we are able to respond to violence from individuals and systems and to lovingly challenge them into pursuing another way towards our common good and our common calling to full humanity.

Following the papers, there was a rich discussion among over 40 attendees.

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