

CONFRONTING CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE: EVIDENCE-BASED
RESEARCH AND DIRECTIONS FOR CHANGE – INVITED SESSION

- Topic: Confronting Clergy Sexual Abuse: Evidence-Based Research and Directions for Change
- Conveners: Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University
Christine Firer Hinze, Fordham University
- Moderator: Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University
- Presenters: Fr. Martin Burnham, P.S.S., Society of St. Sulpice, U.S. Province
Julie Rubio, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
Jennifer Beste, College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University

Fr. Burnham's topic, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Clericalism in Roman Catholic Priests," was the work of a social scientist, a priest and a sexual abuse survivor. His research led him to the conclusion "that there is explanatory power in clericalism when discerning the root causes of the sexual abuse crisis in our Church." Six themes kept recurring in the research into clericalism: the clericalist is self-absorbed, spiritually and emotionally immature, exercises authoritarian leadership, shows a lust for power and privilege, and is aloof. Burnham created a scale to measure observed clericalism in priests, defining it in the light of three elements: aloofness/unaccountability, entitlement/arrogance, and formality/authoritarianism. His conclusions led him to the conviction that clericalist priests tended to be narcissistic and have low levels of "relational humility." They were seen by parishioners as less spiritual, and were rated as lower in the following character strengths: love, honesty, kindness, fairness, forgiveness/mercy, humility/modesty, and spirituality/sense of meaning. He concluded with reflections on whether this personality type might lead a priest to pursue other unhealthy avenues in life and be a possible factor that drives a priest to act out sexually or to abuse alcohol or drugs.

Julie Rubio's discussion of "Seminaries and Clergy Sexual Abuse: What do we know? What do we need to know?" began by putting some distance between her team's research and the so-called "peak thesis," that "cases were initially low in the 1950s, peaked in the 70s, and began to decline in the 80s." But her main concern was to shift the focus of research: almost all discussion had focused on abuse of children, but "when we extend our gaze beyond minors the problem appears to be more complex and ongoing." "Our hypothesis," said Rubio, is that healthy sexual integration as measured by an instrument we created will correlate with high scores on tests of empathy, emotional intelligence and self-care, while unhealthy sexual integration will correlate with the reverse." But the sexual component of structural clericalism is less significant than the role of gender." Sexual violence is gender-based violence, which is always a deviant expression of hypermasculinity. Sexual violence strengthens the perpetrator's masculinity through weakening that of the victim. Rubio concluded her presentation with some remarks on "the difficulty of getting in the door." She surmised that a focus on clericalism led to a low level of participation in their research on the part of the clergy.

Exploring the Catholic Church's documents on clergy sexual abuse from 1980-2015, Jennifer Beste found a dearth of theological reflection on the norms of passivity

and submissiveness expected of children. Her paper, “Justice for Children: New Directions for Responding to the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” pointed out that given the awareness that power is such a factor, it is striking that attitudes to children are not explored in the literature of episcopal response to sexual abuse. A child-centered account of justice is essential, she argued. Drawing on Margaret Farley’s account of justice and her own ethnographic study of children preparing for the sacrament of reconciliation, Beste proposed four interconnected moral norms. Adults must consult children in a spirit of open-ended curiosity and epistemic humility; they need to foster children’s unique subjectivity and agency throughout their religious, moral, and spiritual formation; they must reflect critically on our assumptions of adult privilege and renounce our tendency to exert power and control over children. And the Catholic Church must promote active inclusion of the voices and perspectives of children and youth in ecclesial and theological reflection and practices. Implementing these changes will enable a healthier response to sexual abuse and will respect the rights of children as independent moral agents.

The three papers produced a robust series of questions among the 35 or so participants in the Zoom session, and there were numerous questions left hanging at the end of this extremely vigorous and informative session.

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