

THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS IN THE CHURCH – CONSULTATION

- Topic: Framing the Problem: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Global North and South
- Convener: Cristina Traina, Fordham University
- Moderator: Daniel Horan, OF.M., St. Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)
- Co-presenters: Julie Hanlon Rubio, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University
Paul Schutz, Santa Clara University
- Co-Presenters: Stan Chu Ilo, DePaul University
Sr. Josée Ngalula, Catholic University of Congo, Kinshasa

Because theology and the practices it informs contribute to a culture of sex abuse in the church, theologians must be part of its diagnosis and cure. This requires methodological tools that are suited to the place, time, and culture of the research. It also requires framing the crisis within the history of the “architecture of violence” (Ilo) that shapes today’s church. Our session addressed methods for two such settings: the United States, and Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both studies found that a culture of clericalism reinforced priestly silence about abuse in clerical solidarity born in part of blackmail.

In “Framing the Problem: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the United States,” Julie Hanlon Rubio (*in absentia*) and Paul Schutz described the combined empirical and theological methods they employed in “Beyond ‘Bad Apples’: Understanding Clergy Perpetrated Sexual Abuse as a Structural Problem and Cultivating Strategies for Change,” a two-year study of the roots of the US Catholic sex abuse crisis funded by a grant from “Taking Responsibility: Jesuit Institutions Confront the Causes and Contexts of Clergy Sexual Abuse.” They wanted to overcome the non-empiricism of most theological analyses and the individualism of most empirical psychological analyses. They uncovered structural clericalism invisible to both approaches by collaborating with sociologists and learning quantitative and qualitative sociological methods. They found that US clericalism’s interdependent elements include repression as the main strategy for dealing with sexuality; single-gender formation and scripts of toxic masculinity; and an emphasis on priesthood as power.

An unexpected conclusion transcended liberal and conservative balkanization among US Catholics: a *culture of clericalism*, not *priesthood* in itself, emerged as the culprit. This success convinced them of the revolutionary potential of interdisciplinarity. They also noted the challenges of finding research samples. Diocesan seminaries refused them access to faculty and students; only nine diocesan priests and one bishop agreed to participate; and the sample skewed strongly to men in formation in religious orders in institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, they hope that their key findings can transform US priestly formation at all levels and that other theologians will make rigorous use of sociological methods.

In “Framing the Problem: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Nigeria and DR Congo,” Sr. Josée Ngalula and Fr. Stan Chu Ilo reported on 20 years of Sr. Ngalula’s empirical research on church sexual abuse in those countries, focusing on clerical abuse of nuns. Ilo described the context of this abuse in Africa: a toxic mix of clericalism,

hierarchicalism, patriarchal world views, dominant masculinity, warped scriptural hermeneutics, and abuse of religious authority fuels and sustains an ecclesial culture of covering up abuses “for the good of the church” and condoning double lifestyles as “a coping strategy” for celibacy. Ilo described the narratives and data that Ngalula has collected as reflecting four realities facing the church in Africa on (i) what breaks our hearts; (ii) what breaks our bonds of life and love; (iii) what breaks our communities; (iv) what breaks our future. He traced clerical sexual abuse in Africa, particularly in Congo, to the time of slavery in the 16th century; it continues through series of exploitative relationships and layers of suffering and pain built on an architecture of violence.

Ngalula’s empirical method involved leading small groups in a study of 2 Samuel 13, the rape of Tamar, in which feminine scripts of obedience and service play into masculine power and domination. With this method, nuns gradually begin to witness about similar experiences in the third person, often sharing their or others’ stories for the first time. She reached 5,800 witnesses between 2002 and 2022.

This long survey shows that sexual violence often occurs in the context of spiritual abuse and abuse of authority. The enormous stigma surrounding victimhood is a barrier to research: 43 percent of nuns surveyed believe sex abuse renders victims spiritually impure, 0 percent of them would report abuse if they suffered it or learned of it, and canon lawyers ignore or dismiss the few reports they receive. A culture of “sacred silence” about the seriousness of clerical sexual abuse and boundary violations by clerics and religious results. This situation demands compassionate, creative research methods to help the victims.

In the discussion, Ngalula, Ilo, and some audience members noted that in addition to conducting astute, responsible sociological research theologians can contribute to ending sex abuse by 1) encouraging religious communities to rethink or replace their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; 2) demanding alteration of canon laws requiring victims to give accounts of their own abuse in ecclesiastical courts; 3) in some settings, using dance, music, and other performative media to encourage storytelling and lament, breaking the stigma of abuse along the lines of the US #metoo movement; 4) in some settings, leveraging traditional practices of community-repair-after-a-breach, which focus on reincorporating the victim into communal care.

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