

SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH – CONSULTATION

Topic: The Power and Theology of Abuse
 Convener: Julia Feder, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)
 Moderator: Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M., Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)
 Presenters: Karen Peterson-Iyer, Santa Clara University
 Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University
 Christine Hinze, Fordham University

Last year's consultation session on "Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church" highlighted sexual abuse as abuse of power. As a prerequisite to adequate theological reflection on abuse, analysis of structural power gradients which encourage violent abuse, enable cover-ups, and stand in the way of meaningful reparations is needed. In this year's session, three theologians provided succinct, theologically informed analyses of power from different directions.

Karen Peterson-Iyer's paper, titled "Theorizing Sexual Violence," argued that all sexual desire is shaped by systems of power, and these systems of power are often characterized by inequality, exploitation, and other forms of social violence. Therefore, sexual violence must be theologically situated within the context of sexual hierarchies and other forms of violence. Our social structures and practices are conditioned by cultures of rape that define women as objects of sexual desire. Our personal and collective agency is compromised when we fail to acknowledge the power dynamics that configure our culture(s). Rape culture is both social sin and structural injustice. Clergy sexual abuse and its coverup is enabled by individual, cultural, and structural power gradients, including the logic of coloniality.

Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier's paper, titled "Coloniality, Power, and Sexual Abuse," began with an analysis of the case of former Jesuit and faculty member at Loyola Marymount University, Stephen Sauer, who was convicted in 2023 of drugging and assaulting over a dozen men in New Orleans. LMU released a notification to the university community as part of a weekly e-newsletter, denied any Society responsibility for Sauer's crimes, and rebuffed faculty calls for increased transparency, investigation, and institutional response. Tiemeier argued that Catholic sexual abuse is enabled by ongoing colonial logics. Drawing on French political scientist Françoise Vergès' notion of colonial family romance, Tiemeier claimed that Catholic colonial family romance portrays the "Mother Church" as adopting its members while insisting upon lay members' perennial childhood and permanent debt to their adopted parent. Lay people—and, in particular, women, children, queer people, and people of color—are perennial children whose sex and sexuality must be regulated for their own good. The logic of family romance ignores sexual violence, when it occurs, in order to protect clergy and to maintain the fiction of the romance. Sauer's case illustrates the employment of a Catholic colonial family romance insofar as the LMU administration insists that the university is a family, the students should be protected from scandalizing information, and students and lay faculty/staff are indebted to the administration and the Jesuits for their well-being.

Christine Hinze's paper was titled "The (Ab)uses of Power in the Catholic Church: Where Do We Go From Here?" Drawing on religious historian John C. Seitz's research

on two post-Vatican II Chicago Jesuit abusers, John Powell and Donald McGuire, Hinze argues that Catholic priesthood wields power which can create opportunities for embodied connection with the holy, but also dangerous forms of silence and secret-keeping. Hinze advocated for right practices of power and authority to target, resist, and change vicious individual behaviors, and vicious cultural and structural patterns. “Operative social norms,” as identified by social psychologists and employed by grassroots social-justice movements, are capable of wielding productive forms of power to effect practical, ethical transformation.

In the audience discussion that followed, participants spoke about whether and how the church’s capacity to listen to survivors of sexual abuse is conditioned by power gradients. All three panelists discussed ways in which male ecclesial authorities may find it difficult to listen to survivors’ pain, particularly because—as Hinze noted—under patriarchy, men and boys are isolated from genuine modes of human connection. But, clerical uncomfotability does not mitigate the need for ecclesial accountability. Several lay participants noted experiences of working as faculty members alongside of ordained faculty or university administrators. Though universities often use the language of partnership between lay and ordained faculty/staff, lay theologians did not experience these relationships as egalitarian. Additionally, panelists commented on the degree to which knowledge of sexual violence functions as a means of social control for children in the same way that it does for adult women. Tiemeier remarked that, in colonial contexts, sexual violence of children has often functioned analogously—e.g., in Indigenous residential schools, children often know that sexual violence can serve as a means of punishment and control—but this is not always the case. Hinze noted that, while it is imperative that clerical authorities take responsibility for clerical sexual abuse, positive social norms such as—“if you see something, say something”—can be employed by lay people within Catholic ecclesial structures to encourage healthy boundaries without needing to wait for formal action by ordained clergy.

JULIA FEDER
*Saint Mary’s College
Notre Dame, Indiana*