

Secret sex in the celibate system

A.W. Richard Sipe | Apr. 28, 2010 Examining the Crisis

Viewpoint

Sexual behavior has a long and well-documented history. Even the current problem of sexual abuse of minors is neither new nor limited to clerics. It is a practice that crosses ethnic, cultural, religious and economic strata and custom. Incest (familial contact) is the most common. However, the sexual abuse of minors by declared celibate clerics poses special issues. There are three factors that draw special attention to the sexual practices of Roman Catholic clerics today.

The moral teaching concerning human sexuality, promulgated by the church, is clear and unequivocal. Catholic bishops and priests under the aegis of the pope hold themselves up as the teachers and arbiters of human sexual morality. Human failure is more remarkable in commanders and not as easily forgiven as transgressions among the troops.

The history of sexual violations of Roman Catholic clergy and church response has been well preserved in church documents from the Council of Ancyra in 315 to the 2001 document, *De delictis gravioribus*, authored by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

The Council of Ancyra demanded strict penalties: solitary confinement, fasts, isolation and supervision for any cleric caught having sex with a minor. Ratzinger's document demands that all canonical cases of clergy sex abuse of minors be sent to his office under the requirement for strictest secrecy (forgiveness of a violation is reserved to the pope).

The complete historical record of knowledge of clerical sex provides an impressive body of evidence about transgressions. One of the most striking missives is the 1049 letter to Pope Leo IX from St. Peter Damian, the patron saint of church reform, in which he recommended zero tolerance. He taught that any priest having sex with a minor, mostly boys and young clerics at the time, should be stripped of his clerical office. All of his documents are explicit in their description of various sexual acts from sensual kisses on the mouth and mutual masturbation to anal penetration.

Celibacy was a voluntary ascetic practice of early Christian monks and some clerics, but not universally required of Roman Catholic priests until 1139.

Roman Catholic priests now are mandated to make a promise or vow of celibacy before they can be ordained. Clerical celibacy precludes absolutely any willful sexual release.

Questions about mandated clerical celibacy have bombarded general consciousness in light of the onslaught of reports of clerical abuse and its cover-up by church authority. It is fair to ask: What is the connection between the demand for cultic purity and abuse of minors?

The current crisis poses a serious challenge for church authority to answer that question.

To the average person, this demand of Canon Law 277 imposes a seemingly impossible task, namely perfect and perpetual continence. Although the church propagates the myth that bishops and priests are celibate, this is not based on fact. Several modern studies have used various methods to measure the degree of celibate observance. No researcher so far has assessed that more than 50 percent of Roman Catholic clergy at any one time are in fact practicing celibacy.

Sexual abuse of minors is only one type of clerical sexual activity. The 2004 John Jay Report concluded from a survey of church files that 6.5 percent of priests ordained between 1960 and 1984 were involved in sex abuse of minors. My study from ethnological data concluded that 6 percent from that same period were abusers.

It is nonetheless a significant symptom of pathology within clerical culture.

Questions about clerical celibacy have become prominent in discussions about the Catholic clergy sex abuse crisis for obvious reasons. What is the connection between this requirement of sexual abstinence and deprivation and sexual activity with minors? If one is going to be sexually active in defiance of a vow, why involve a minor?

Is mandated celibacy alone causal to sex abuse of a minor? As the single factor the answer is no. Vowed celibacy does not drive a bishop or priest to have sex with minors. The answer, however, is also yes. Required celibacy in concert with the clerical culture of entitlement and secrecy is a prominent element for some clergy seeking out minors as sexual partners.

Many priests who abuse minors were themselves abused as special friends of older priests or others. These kinds of liaisons are frequent in seminaries where solitary or mutual masturbation is looked upon as an ?innocent? failure. Secrecy about all clerical sex is sacrosanct within the system.

Roman Catholic clerical culture favors doctrinal rigidity, conformity, obedience, submission and psychosexual immaturity, mistaken for innocence, in its candidates. These are the personality elements that lead to advancement and power in the clerical system. Single men are more easily controlled if their sexuality is secret. Double lives on all levels of clerical life are tolerated if they do not cause scandal or raise legal problems. Sexual activity between bishops and priests and adult partners is well known within clerical circles. The secret system forms a comfortable refuge for unresolved gay conflicts. There is a new emerging awareness of the systemic nature of sexual/celibate behavior within the Roman Catholic ministry that is increasingly destabilizing to the church.

Dire consequences will follow the exposure of this sexual system embedded in a secret celibate culture. Authorities who are or have been sexually active, although not with minors, are hard put to publicly correct clerics who are abusing minors. The need for secrecy, the cover-up, extends beyond defending criminal activity of a sex abuser. The power and control that holds the Roman Catholic church together depends on preservation of the celibate myth. The Vatican and Pope John Paul II declared its inviolability.

The truth about secret sex in the celibate system portends grave danger. The reality of celibate violations extends beyond priests who abuse minors and the bishops who hide them.

If celibate violations beyond minor abuse and cover-up are exposed, will the church fall like Humpty Dumpty? Or will the truth about clerical celibacy and its systemic corruption lead to a needed reformation?

[Richard Sipe is a mental health counselor and author who earlier spent 18 years as a Benedictine monk and priest.]

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