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Report spreads blame for Catholic sex abuse

David Gibson Religion News Service | May. 17, 2011

A technician scans the fingerprints of an applicant for a position in the Archdiocese of Washington in this 2004 file photo. Background checks on priests, other church personnel and volunteers who work with children take place in nearly every U.S. dioces e in the country. (CNS file photo)

NEW YORK -- Nearly a decade after revelations of widespread sexual abuse of minors rocked the Catholic Church in the U.S., a comprehensive report on the scandal is set for release on Wednesday (May 18), hoping to provide answers about a crisis that has raised myriad questions despite years of attention.

Was celibacy to blame for the abuse? Gays in the priesthood? The social revolution of the ?60s, or the benighted seminary education of the repressive 1950s?

The truth turns out to be far more complex, according to a copy of the report by researchers at John Jay College of Criminal Justice that was provided by a church leader who believes the findings accurately reflect the causes of the church?s sexual abuse crisis, for good and for ill.

The findings will likely unsettle both liberal and conservative critics, as well as victims? advocates.

The 300-page report, formally called ?The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010,? upends a number of popular misconceptions. While some will challenge the report?s methodology?and note that U.S. bishops paid for half the estimated $1.8 million price tag?the ?Causes and Context? study is clearly a landmark in the research of child sexual abuse.

The first myth challenged by the study is that priests tend to be pedophiles. Of nearly 6,000 priests accused of abuse over the past half century (about 5 percent of the total number of priests serving during that period), less than 4 percent could be considered pedophiles, the report notes?that is, men who prey on children.

?Priest-abusers were not `pedophile priests?,? the researchers state flatly.

Second, the researchers found no statistical evidence that gay priests were more likely than straight priests to abuse minors?a finding that undermines a favorite talking point of many conservative Catholics. The disproportionate number of adolescent male victims was about opportunity, not preference or pathology, the

report states.

What?s more, researchers note that the rise in the number of gay priests from the late 1970s onward actually corresponded with ?a decreased incidence of abuse?not an increased incidence of abuse.?

Similarly, celibacy remained a constant throughout peaks and valleys of abuse rates, and priests may be less likely to abuse children today than men in analogous professions. As a result, liberal Catholics who advocate a married priesthood, or those who are convinced that committing to a lifetime without sex must lead to perversion, may not have the abuse crisis to leverage their arguments.

Better preparation for a life of celibacy is key, however, and improved seminary training and education in the 1980s corresponds to a ?sharp and sustained decline? in abuse since then?a dramatic improvement that has often been overlooked.

The huge spike in abuse cases in the 1960s and 1970s, the authors found, was essentially due to emotionally ill-equipped priests who were trained in earlier years and lost their way in the social cataclysm of the sexual revolution.

Indeed, the John Jay researchers write, ?Individual characteristics do not predict that a priest will commit sexual abuse of a minor. Rather, vulnerabilities, in combination with situational stresses and opportunities, raise the risk of abuse.?

The ?situational? nature of the abuse by clergy is comparable to that of police officers who brutalize people, the authors write. The stress of the work, the perils of isolation and a lack of oversight are factors that contribute to ?deviant behavior.?

With fewer and fewer priests available to minister to growing numbers of American Catholics, the Catholic bishops will be forced to do a better job supporting priests and providing respites from their often grinding schedules. That would likely necessitate a larger role for the laity and women?an issue fraught with controversy.

The John Jay researchers take pains to credit the hierarchy for making important strides in combating child abuse?an assertion victim advocates will strenuously dispute?and they point out that society as a whole was only slowly coming to understand the nature of child abuse as U.S. dioceses were swamped with cases.

At the same time, however, researchers note the bishops? abysmal track record in so many tragic instances, and say church leadership was reflexively defensive and self-protective?behavior that fits a well-defined pattern of crisis management in large institutions.

Indeed, the authors convincingly argue that the clerical culture that fostered and concealed deviance by priests is remarkably similar to the law enforcement culture that allows police brutality. The church, like the police, is a hierarchical organization that operates in a decentralized way, with each department (or diocese) an authority unto itself and not inclined to open itself to oversight.

On Monday, the Vatican told bishops around the world to establish clear policies for dealing with clergy abusers; they issued a number of ?guidelines? to convince bishops to comply with civil laws of reporting abuse accusations?if there are any. But the new Vatican policies also reiterate that each bishop will have the final say in any process, and that each bishop remains ultimately answerable only to the pope.

That approach is not likely to convince a flock that has learned by hard experience to be skeptical of their bishops?most recently in the wake of a recent grand jury report in Philadelphia detailing appalling lapses in dealing with abuse allegations.

The doctrine of the undiluted authority of the bishop, combined with the hierarchy?s track record as a group of crisis managers concerned with protecting the institution, may be the central problem for the bishops revealed by the sex abuse crisis.

That?s certainly the main challenge put forth by authors of the new John Jay report, who argue that the American Catholic hierarchy must finally adopt uniform, secure policies characterized by genuine transparency and true accountability, especially for bishops.

Taking that difficult step is the only way the bishops can begin to show that the hierarchy is different from Wall Street financiers or a protective police bureaucracy. It?s also perhaps the quickest way for the bishops to restore the Catholic Church?s credibility as a compelling witness to the faith rather than just another suspect institution.

Editor's Note: The full text of the John Jay report is now available as a pdf file: **Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010** [2]

For more coverage of the John Jay report, see:

- **Bishops at center of abuse scandal, and potential reform** **[3]**, RNS, May 18
- **Report spreads blame for Catholic sex abuse** [4], RNS, May 17
- **Diocesan programs help build 'safety barriers' against child abusers** [5], CNS, May 18 2011
- **No room for complacency in protecting children from abuse, bishop says** [6], CNS, May 18 2011
- **US bishops say new John Jay report on abuse key to understanding issue** [7], CNS, May 18 2011
- **Key quotes from National Review Board's 'causes and context' report** [8], CNS, May 17 2011
- **Key events in US church response to clergy sex abuse crisis** [9], CNS, May 17 2011
- **Bishops' child protection officer looks to church's next steps on abuse** [10], CNS, May 17 2011
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