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Initial thoughts on the new sex abuse report

Suzanne Morse | May. 18, 2011 NCR Today

I am just absorbing the news articles outlining the results of the long-awaited study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice regarding the causes and contexts of clergy sexual abuse. Both David Gibson of Religion News Service [1] and Laurie Goodstein of *The New York Times* [2] have detailed pieces on the study, which will be released today.

My first thought is how incredibly valuable this study will be to help us understand what caused the scourge of clergy sexual abuse, both in understanding what creates an abusive priest and what kind of culture protects him.

The RNS piece states: ?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.??

That seems to me a direct criticism of the system that priests are placed in and the failure of the hierarchy to adequately address the very human needs of the clergy.

I will also be interested to read how the authors discuss the tantalizing finding that the social and sexual upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s influenced the rise in abuse.

The *Times* says: ?the report says, the abuse occurred because priests who were poorly prepared and monitored, and were under stress, landed amid the social and sexual turmoil of the 1960s and ?70s. Known occurrences of sexual abuse of minors by priests rose sharply during those decades, the report found, and the problem grew worse when the church?s hierarchy responded by showing more care for the perpetrators than the victims.? I am a bit apprehensive of so facile an explanation that claims that decades of abuse stemmed from the ?sexual revolution.?

But I am also too young to have experienced that time period -- and the social confusion that came with it -- firsthand.

Additionally, while it is heartening that the report acknowledges the real failures by the hierarchy to show care for the victims (in their attempts to focus more on the care of perpetrators), it seems curious that this important moment of accountability would be juxtaposed against the social upheavals of those two decades. Still, it will be valuable to read how culture -- both within and without the Church -- impacted this crisis.

One final note -- both RNS and the *Times* assert that the report likely will not satisfy either conservatives, who have blamed gay priests, or liberals, who focused on priestly celibacy.

While there are certainly individuals on both sides of the political spectrum who have used the clergy sexual abuse crisis to promote their favorite political hobby horses, my sense is that is a somewhat reductionist formulation.

There are Catholics on both sides of the political aisle who have spent countless hours sincerely trying to determine what caused this crisis and what the church, as a whole, needs to do to address it in an authentic way.

Let?s hope this report orients the ecclesiastical political discussions that the Church is having toward understanding the causes so that we might find the solutions.

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