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Major recommendations from 'causes and context' report on abuse

by David Gibson by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Making recommendations "to Catholic leadership" was an objective of the "causes and context" study released in Washington May 18. The study sought to understand factors that led to sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests in the United States.

In a key summary observation on abuse prevention, the report said:

"For abuse to occur, three factors must converge: There must be a person who is motivated to commit the act of abuse, there must be a potential victim and there must be a lack of a 'capable guardian.'"

In light of that, the report recommended that "careful attention" be paid to the "situational factors" associated with abuse. "Reduce the opportunities for abuse to occur," it said.

Putting the findings of the study itself to use in seminaries and in the continuing education of priests was a recommendation. The report said:

- The study findings "should be digested and used as the basis for a mandatory curriculum for a workshop for all seminary faculty."
- The human formation of seminarians and priests "should include a thorough understanding of the major findings of this study."

Abuse prevention policies should "focus on three factors: education, situational prevention models, and oversight and accountability," the report said. It recommended that Catholic leaders and others in the church:

- Make it more difficult for priests to commit acts of abuse. Safe environment programs serve this goal.
- Increase the risks of abuse. Make it more likely abusers will be identified.
- Refuse to accept "techniques of neutralization," used by abusers to "excuse and justify" their behavior.
- Educate seminarians and priests "about the harm of abuse to victims."
- Clearly delineate "behavioral expectations appropriate to a life of celibacy."
- Institute periodic evaluation of the performance of priests.
- Maintain and evaluate steps to prevent abuse.
- Exercise "transparency in reporting and dealing with sexual abuse."

The report recommended steps to reduce "the need for priests to develop social bonds with adolescents they are mentoring." It said priests should have "outlets to form social friendships and suitable bonds with age-appropriate persons."

The report stressed that "to fully achieve change in the Catholic Church, all diocesan leaders must be committed to transparency about their actions, ensure that the immediate and appropriate responses to abuse become routine and ensure that such actions are adopted on a national level by all church leaders."

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**

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