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Critics point to John Jay study's limitations

Tom Roberts | May. 23, 2011

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A member of the media holds a copy of the John Jay report on the causes and context of clergy sex abuse during a press conference at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops headquarters in Washington May 18. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

Release of the John Jay College study on the causes of sexual abuse by Catholic priests signals the end of the U.S. bishops? five-year, $1.8 million inquiry into the institution they govern and the priests in their charge. But the new study hardly quiets the fundamental questions that have dogged the church and its leaders since the crisis was first publicized in the mid-1980s.

The conclusions of the study were immediately challenged by victims of abuse, their advocates, and those who maintain an enormous archive of documentation related to the scandal. Among the reasons they say the report should be approached with caution or skepticism:

- Questions persist about the reliability of the basic data that underpins both the most recent study, as well as one on the nature and scope of the scandal that was released in 2004, because the researchers relied principally on reporting by bishops. The reliability of such reporting is called into question on a number of fronts and was most recently challenged by a grand jury report that claimed that officials of the Philadelphia archdiocese had not reported dozens of credibly accused priests. Doubts about the reliability of the numbers were even given credibility by one of the John Jay researchers in a recent interview.
- The conclusion that priests? behavior was influenced by and reflected turmoil in American culture during the 1960s and 1970s is called into question, or at least qualified, say experts, given revelations of similar widespread scandals in the United Kingdom and several European countries. The dimensions of the scandal in those countries surfaced in recent months, at a point when the John Jay researchers were concluding research on the U.S. church.
- The lack of any in-depth look at institutional dynamics, particularly clerical/hierarchical culture, an element some think is integral to understanding why and how abuse of children was covered up and tolerated for so many years.

Beyond the limited dimensions of the study -- it covered the years 1950 through 2010 and concentrated on the behavior of priests -- questions persist about the bishops? role in protecting perpetrators and shuffling abusive priests.

Terence McKiernan and Anne Barrett Doyle of BishopAccountability.org [1], a Web site that maintains a massive archive of documentation about the crisis, claimed in an interview that the basic numbers of the study were suspect from the start because in instances where law enforcement has become involved, such as in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, the number of priests involved in abuse ends up to be many times greater than

originally reported.

Margaret Leland Smith, data analyst for the study, was asked April 5, during a two-day program on sex abuse at Marquette University Law School in Milwaukee, about the criticism that the study relied on data self-reported by the same bishops who, in many cases, were being investigated. She responded that the researchers were not engaged in ?a prosecutorial process. It was not an audit process in that way.? What is certain, she said, was that the pattern of abuse and its characteristics -- increasing through the ?60s and ?70s and subsiding in the ?80s -- ?was repeated in diocese after diocese and region after region across the country.

?Whether or not the count includes all, the fact that all of the allegations, almost all we had, were supported by evidence and substantiated means that one can make an inference that there may have been other allegations that the dioceses did not submit because they did not find them substantiated. I have no evidence one way or the other on that.?

She joked, ?I?m going to get in trouble for that.?

Responding just weeks after the new revelations in Philadelphia, she added, ?It seems such a logical inference given the recent events, I can?t not say it.? In Philadelphia, the grand jury and an independent investigator found that at least two dozen priests should have been considered credibly accused but had not been reported.

In a statement May 18, McKiernan termed the report ?a tragically missed opportunity and yet another black mark on an institution already reeling from revelations in the Philadelphia archdiocese. There is only one hope for redeeming this process now, and that is for the bishops to release publicly all the data that the John Jay College has been using, so that other scholars can analyze the data for problems and begin to draw their own conclusions.?

Richard Sipe, a former priest who was trained to deal with priests? mental health problems and has written extensively on celibacy and the priesthood, said he welcomes the report as an important study ?because it outlines the geography of the Catholic church?s problems with human sexuality as they impact its clergy.?

He said one of the study?s greatest values may be that it prompts other research and shows areas where research needs to be done. Among the study?s weaknesses, he said, is its failure to account for clerical culture except in a ?very small, nonessential way.?

?What other group of men is dedicated in an ironclad way to a vow of perfect and perpetual chastity?? he asked.

He said the study also lacked a serious investigation of the institutional elements peculiar to Catholicism -- secrecy, clericalism, authoritarianism -- that are surfacing, in ways similar to the experience in the United States, as the sex abuse scandal is revealed in other countries.

Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, who has long advocated for victims of clergy abuse and currently consults with plaintiffs? attorneys internationally, said he thinks the report is missing important data ?about the increased number of cases of abuse that are coming forward that occurred before the 1960s.? He said in his work with lawyers throughout the United States he has seen ?cases of hundreds of adults in their 60s and 70s that have only begun coming forward.?

He said that while the John Jay study is limited to the United States and to the years 1950 to 2010, there are signs in other countries that abuse within the institution occurred widely well before the period studied. In the United Kingdom, for example, scores of people in their 60s and 70s have begun, for the first time in their lives, to tell of abuse they suffered in private Catholic schools. ?These are incidents that happened that had nothing to do with sociocultural changes in the ?60s and ?70s.?

The study, he said, is all about the behavior of priests and does little questioning of why bishops behaved as they did. In that sense, he said, the report ?misses the essential point, which is: When the abuse and abuser became known to church authorities, why were they allowed to continue doing what they did??

The ongoing reports of sex abuse in other countries ?throws a monkey wrench in the theory? of causes advanced in the report. ?The patterns we?ve seen are similar in every country: significant amounts of sexual abuse of vulnerable groups and the pressure of a religious culture on victims and parents against saying anything.?

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