

Sex abuse scandal keeps priests from healthy relationships with young people

Gerald Kleba | Jul. 8, 2013

Perspective

I was wearing walking shorts and a sports shirt, so when the hospice nurse arrived at the house, I had to introduce myself: "I'm Gerry Kleba, the family priest." I'm not much into clericalism, so I don't use the title "Father." Within minutes, the mother of the family slipped away peacefully, as her children and I prayed, cried, talked, even laughed. I'd known the family for 40 years. The older children -- in their teens then -- had typed the parish bulletin on stencils, mimeographed and folded them on Saturday mornings at the rectory.

I had barely left the house, started my Prius and driven to the corner when I started to feel not only very sad, but very, very angry.

I turned off the radio to examine my emotions as I drove through the old neighborhood that had been my parish for 10 years. Everything we had talked about this afternoon, happily recalling my private Saturdays with these teens, could never happen today. The clergy abuse, the scandal of the cover-ups, and the subsequent "Protecting God's Children" program, which decrees that a priest can never be alone with young people, had made that impossible. No young priest today has a chance for the quality intimacy that makes celibacy worthwhile and compelling, because his life will have to be spent at arm's length from the very youngsters who are the most in need. The implication is: "Child, you're not safe with me. You can't trust me."

When trust is lost, no one knows how to restore it. And no institution has betrayed trust so blatantly as the Catholic church, where the lies and cover-ups are traceable to the highest echelons of the hierarchy, including the Vatican. Now that we have seen American cardinals among those assembled in Rome for the election of a pope, I am angrier than ever. Some of these men are directly responsible for the crisis that has resulted in keeping me and other priests from having warm, healthy relationships with young people.

At another parish in an African-American community, while I was a board member of the YMCA, I had my picture taken with a fourth-grader, John Nichols, whom I'd named for a scholarship to summer camp. When our photo ran on the cover of the Y's Annual Report, we had a party in the rectory dining room. I introduced the Y president, formal and dignified in suit and tie, cufflinks, buffed shoes. John was shy but excited as he tore off the wrapping paper and smoothed over the shiny brass frame with his index finger. It was the posed photo of the two of us, sitting on a bench, with a basketball in my lap.

After the party, John and I were alone in the room. "What do you think people will know about us, when they see this?" I asked him.

His answer was a sheepish question. "They'll know that we're friends?"

"Right, John!" I shouted like a game show announcer. We clutched hands with our elbows on the table in an arm-wrestling pose.

On that day with the grieving family, I hadn't driven 2 miles toward home when all the ramifications of the abuse scandal hit me head-on, like an 18-wheeler. In 1992, this photo of a black boy with a white Catholic priest, and the intimacy of our close presence with each other, seemed like a foolproof YMCA fundraising idea. Today, people might accuse me of "grooming" a youngster for indecent treatment. I could never sit next to a boy on a bench and put my arm around him today. I could not call him my friend.

I am a priest who has thought about this and suffered deeply from this because I succeeded an abuser priest at my present parish. The St. Louis archdiocese had knowingly appointed that abuser priest to this parish after having already paid \$60,000 to those whom he had ravaged at a previous assignment. It has taken me years of patient, transparent, humble and joyful Gospel living to bring trust back to this parish.

I have been a priest for 46 years -- working with children, writing stories of love and trust. I remain a priest because, although I am angry at the hierarchy who close authoritarian ranks and hurt our church, I believe there are more of those stories to be written, and I stake my future on the belief that with God, all things are possible.

[Gerald Kleba is the pastor of St. Cronan Church in St. Louis. He is writing a book on his work with children as a parish priest.]

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