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The Impact of Clerical and Seminary Culture on Irish Roman Catholic Clergy who have Sexually Abused Minors

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Introductory Remarks
Clerical Culture
Seminary
Empirical Data: Three Studies
Does Seminary and Clerical Culture contribute to climate in which sexual abuse and boundary violations become possible?
Clerical Culture

- An amalgam of norms, beliefs and practices that has developed through time in the Roman Catholic Church (Cozzens, 2004: 151)

- “The trajectory of material reality, relationship structures and universe of ideas that, across the centuries, have come to characterize the world of the ordained..of the Roman Catholic Church” (Papesh, 2004: 47)
Three Studies


- Individual face-to-face interviews with 20 US Catholic Bishops and 6 priest perpetrators of child sexual abuse

Aim:

- To gather data on the Church organization “that was” – “organizational culture” - asking participants to describe and analyse their own and other bishops’ responses to allegations of csa by clergy from the 1970s to the mid 1980s
Goode et al. (2003)

- 8 convicted clergy and 5 family members (26 convicted clergy invited to participate)
- 4 clergy colleagues of clergy offenders
- 20 Church Personnel – clergy and lay staff
- 102 delegates (n = 153) – postal survey
- 35 bishops (n = 44) – postal survey
- 1000 randomly selected Irish adults (telephone and some face-to-face) (n=1,081)
Goode et al (2003) Aim:

- To examine impact of CSA by clergy - psychological, social and faith perspective
- To examine experience of disclosure and response to CSA by clergy
- To inform recommendations for Church policy
Keenan (2007).

- 40 hours of recorded face-to-face group and individual interviews with 9 clerical men who had sexually abused minors and ongoing written contact.
Aims:

- To engage with the first-person accounts … not through the preconceived ‘consensus’ of a diagnostic or pathologising lens
- To allow for an individual and contextual meaning of the stories to emerge.
- To deepen the current understanding of the problem and contribute to more informed therapeutic work in this field.
Rationale for Selection of Studies

- All qualitative studies involving face-to-face interviews with Roman Catholic Bishops and clergy in relation to child sexual abuse by clergy
- Focused on the subjective understanding of the participants’ reality and the social reality in which they operated,
- The search for meaning
Explanations of Bishops for Handling of Abuse Complaints (Balboni, 1998; Goode et al., 2003)

- Viewed problem as one of moral failing and breach of discipline – spiritual solutions
- Appeared to focus on ‘act’ not consequence of ‘act’ for child so abused
- Familiarity with seal of confession – scrupulous in keeping confidential any allegations of wrongdoing
- Did not see it as duty to inform Civil Authorities
Bishops saw obligation as preservation of the institution
Preventing scandal
Vocation to priesthood permanent – tried to salvage priesthood (personal meaning for Bishops) – identification with the role
Ignorance and lack of awareness of pervasiveness of CSA and impact
Absence of confiding space - Handled issues alone – no major disclosures to other bishops

Bishops’ meetings discussed everything else but matters of deep personal concern

- Fear – of breach of celibacy; of displeasing others; of mortal sin; God, failure…being found out
- Rigid understanding of obedience
- Avoidance of Conflict
- Subservient dispositioning
- Confidentiality of Confessional as Confiding Space
- Within Seminary Environment perfected ideal of ‘ideal’ clerical maleness – split between the ‘reality’ of men’s actual experience and ‘ideal’ theoretical world of moral theology
Absence of Discussion on sexuality, intimacy, relationships
Seminary training had focus on conformity to institution
No spirit of open disclosure
Sexuality something to be feared
Intellectualised problems of living – sexuality and emotion
Neither adequately supported nor challenged in seminary re celibate vocation
Denial of sexuality issues – celibacy and homosexuality

Focused on rules and regulations, conformity to system, acceptable way to be priest.
How Clerical and Seminary Culture Contributes to a Climate in Which CSA by Clergy Becomes Possible

- A Moral education that was overly intellectualised
- Clerical Culture of silence, secrecy and denial
- Unquestioning loyalty towards the Institutional Church
- Lack of adequate support and accountability structures for clergy and Church Leaders
- Avoidance of conflict
- Fear - of the consequences of taking action
Lessons in denial and concealment perfected in the highly policed environment of the seminary

Vulnerabilities not addressed in seminary. Failure on part of institution to help individuals seminarians turn areas of personal vulnerability into areas of resilience

Response to problem that individualises the problem to the neglect of the more systemic dimensions
The seminary and clergy culture described in Keenan (2007) study, in which honest dialogue between the men and their seminary professors, bishops, superiors and other lay people was discouraged, not only failed to bring the participants to a point in which they would make good judgements, but rather encouraged an approach to morality that was devoid of internal reflection, personal awareness and the importance of seeing oneself in the shoes of the other.
Similar conclusions can be drawn from Balboni (1998) and Goode et al. (2003) study

Honest dialogue between the bishops about issues of the day not taking place

An approach to morality that was devoid of internal reflection, personal awareness and the importance of seeing oneself in the shoes of the other

Church leaders failed to make good judgements
Two Aspects of Clerical Culture That Are Seen As Particularly Problematic

- An All-Male Celibate Environment
- Clericalism – Clergy Seen As Elite – By themselves and Laity
An All-Male Celibate Environment

- Sealed culture – overdeveloped masculine energy, absence of feminine (Ranson, 2002).
- Competitive energy
- Incapacity for honest internal reflection
- Inability to relate intimately to others
- Dependence on clerical role for self identification
- Lack of humanising tenderness
- Isolation and discontent
Not the great fraternity that was promised
Group policing itself in relation to the performative aspects of priesthood
More private aspects of life remain concealed
Human frailty concealed; lived reality denied
Formation / Seminary

- Prior to 1992 the Formation curriculum focused on the spiritual and the intellectual.
- New subjects attached to an already overcrowded academic schedule.
Left to the sensibilities and abilities of formation staff, who themselves formed in a different era

Sometimes lacked the skill or vision necessary to develop the new programme

Culture of seminaries one of education regarding the orthodoxy and not of the whole person (Ranson, 2002: 394)
Structure of Seminary also a problem
- All-male clerical environment – a constraining environment
- Institutional life breeds dependency and illusory security – not a preparation for life outside
At time when individual identity development important the seminary structure demands a collective identity – *uno voce*

Individual expression of difference discouraged – gives rise to covert competitiveness between the individual and the ‘system’
Alienation of the individual

Sometimes anger

In such an impersonal and covertly conflictual environment, intimacy only met in a covert fashion

When aggression and intimacy needs combine, sexual acting out becomes a distinct possibility (Marshall, 1993, 1989).
Clergy as elite
Sinful to make unkind accusations against a priest or bishop
Priest or bishop could do no wrong
May explain why some victims remained silent about sexually abusive experiences
Why Institutional Church acted as it did
Why Secular institutions deferred to the Institutional Church in relation to CSA
System and Individual in Apparent Allignment

- On the issue of abuse – Moral failure – Sin- Focus on Moral Theology
  - Focus on ‘Act’ rather than consequence for child
  - Fact of a ‘child’ less significant than ‘sex’ act – violation of chastity and celibate vocation
  - Now reappraising views – One through therapy; the other through pressure of Media
Individual and System sharing certain aspects of Institutional Belief and Practices such as Silence, Denial, Clergy as Elite –

A common culture obscured from view when one focuses on individual action