Special Issue
Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: Trusting the Clergy?

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The Sexual Abuse Crisis– Issues We Still Have to Face: Response to Fr. Donald B. Cozzens

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SUMMARY. This essay is a direct response to Fr. Donald Cozzens' keynote at the Symposium "Trusting the Clergy: The churches and communities come to grips with sexual misconduct." It focuses on the issues we still have to face concerning sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, which are: How do we know what the truth is when there are sexual abuse allegations; and how do we protect children from such abuse?
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The Catholic Church in America is not going to go away. I hope and expect that it will continue as a vibrant force in people's lives, and as a safe haven in all the many ways that it has the potential to offer. What this means is that we are still going to have children in our churches and

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those children are still going to come under the care of our leaders. We need to think urgently about how to protect the children who will come under our care in the future.

I indicated in my previous essay how difficult it is to recognize abusers. The reality is that it is very difficult to know whether someone is what he seems (Salter, 2003, p. 196). I would like to reflect on the implications of that reality as we think about some of the policies articulated in the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" that were discussed by Archbishop Flynn (United State Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002). I would like to point to two of the Articles in which I see embedded profound issues that we still have to face, and to use these issues as a springboard for knowledge and awareness that you may be able to factor into your thinking and actions in the months and years ahead.

Article 2 states that "Dioceses/eparchies will have mechanisms in place to respond promptly to any allegation where there is reason to believe that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred." The issue is, what is "reason to believe"? Who determines that there is "reason to believe"? Let me tell you about a conversation I had with a priest. He described a situation where two children recently came forward independently with credible allegations about sexual activity with a priest. The accused priest, he said, is also very credible in his denial of those allegations. This very concerned priest was in a quandary about who was telling the truth.

The reality is that in most situations where allegations of sexual abuse occur, there is a very high degree of ambiguity. These cases are rarely clear. In order to achieve greater clarity, you need to know about how children disclose, and about how people who abuse children operate. For example, the Reverend Donald Cozzens in his essay described a colleague, a professor of moral theology, who was determined to have sex with a male teen-age student. This professor had a great cover for his obsessions. He chose an arena in which he was unlikely to be suspect. It is important to recognize that people who abuse children will construct a life, and lead a double life, in which they present as nice people (De Becker, 1997). They do good deeds, they say the right things, they are apparently sincere believers, and they may actually be sincere believers. But they are still people who prey on children. They are still a danger to children.

When you are trying to determine which of the conflicting stories, the alleged victim's or the alleged perpetrator's, you have the greatest "reason to believe," you must understand that a priest who has the appearance of piety, who demonstrates good deeds reflecting care and concern, who reflects all the qualities that you consider valuable in a priest, may not believe any of it. Or, he may believe some of it, but that does not mean that he is not abusing children. I am sure we all know of situations where people in the community cannot believe that a particular scoutmaster, teacher, or cleric could have possibly done this to children. But very often being the proverbial pillar of the community is one of the ways that a person gets away with abuse. It is one of the ways that he gains parents' trust and access to their children, and seduces children unsuspectingly into sexual behavior.

To complicate judgment further, when children disclose sexual abuse, they often disclose in a way that is not very believable or straightforward (Sorenson & Snow, 1991). First, children are often afraid to disclose. Studies of college students and adults reveal that those who had been sexually abused in their childhoods rarely told someone about it (Sauzier, 1989). I do not doubt that children today, with greater education and awareness, are more likely to disclose than were children in the past. Yet even so, there is reason to believe that many abused children still do not disclose. Those who do disclose often wait months or years before telling someone. Why? They don't disclose because they feel that they won't be believed, that it will bring trouble to their families, because they are afraid they or someone else will be harmed if they tell. They may believe that what is happening is their fault; they may be ashamed or feel stigmatized. This is especially the case with boys, who worry particularly about their sexuality and adequacy in the eyes of other children (Black & De Blassie, 1993; Finkelhor & Brown, 1985).

Children also might not disclose because someone they fear and/or respect has told them that this is a secret. Sometimes children love their abusers, and don't want to get them into trouble or lose the love and attention that person gives to them. Don't forget that people who abuse children are manipulative. They manipulate people around them into believing that they are upstanding citizens, and they manipulate children into these fears and feelings so that the children will maintain the secrecy of the abuse (Singer, Hussey, & Strom, 1992).

When children do disclose, the majority don't just come out and tell their story (Sorenson & Snow, 1991). Sometimes abuse is revealed directly. Teenagers are more likely to tell someone directly than are younger children. More typically, sexual abuse in revealed indirectly or piecemeal. I have conducted a research study that looked at children's disclosures. The abuse of one child in the study was discovered after a

playmate reported to her mother that her friend was rubbing the Ken and Barbie dolls together in a way that made the little girl uncomfortable. That child's mother reported this to the abused child's mother, who called protective services after questioning her daughter. The abuser was identified and confessed.

Sexual abuse can also be discovered in other ways. For example, an adult might walk in on a child being abused. A pediatrician might discover that the patient's vaginal complaints are caused by chlamydia. When children do tell, however, they often tell over time, with pieces of their experience emerging over days, weeks, or months. Sometimes children will disclose sexual abuse and then insist that what they said isn't true. Although people may interpret retractions as proof that the abuse didn't happen, it is far more likely for children to retract because they see that people get upset and angry, sometimes at them, that they may not be believed, that it brings trouble to the family, and that it brings pain to the people that love them. The child may feel that he or she has done something wrong, and attempt to undo the damage by insisting that it didn't really happen, or that only some of it happened, or that it really happened to someone else. In the pain and confusion that accompanies disclosure, a child may yearn to return to the more stable pre-disclosure state, even at the expense of continuing abuse. Significantly, the majority of children who say they were mistaken after they have disclosed sexual abuse eventually reaffirm that they had been abused (Bradley & Woods, 1996; Sorenson & Snow, 1991).

As you can see, the ways children disclose do not always lend themselves intuitively to "reason to believe." Unless you know how children disclose, you are likely to dismiss many of their disclosures as not believable. Sometimes the question you have to ask yourself is, "Why would a child lie to get into trouble?" We know why a perpetrator would lie to get out of trouble. Not infrequently, greater clarity can be achieved in these ambiguous situations when you ask, "Who has the greatest motive to lie?"

Usually the person with the greatest motive to lie is someone who is trying to cover something bad that he or she has done. Children can also lie. In cases of clergy abuse, however, I don't think it is very likely, because I cannot think of many motives for a child to lie. As a consequence, I believe that every allegation must be approached as reasonable and appropriately pursued. And, for the good of the child and his or her family, take the stance that the child is to be believed, not a skeptical or doubting attitude.

Archbishop Flynn also made reference to Article 5 in the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." Within this article is a statement that an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor by a priest or deacon will initiate "a preliminary investigation, in harmony with canon law." "If this investigation so indicates," further steps will be taken, including reporting the priest or deacon to civil authorities, relieving the alleged offender of his ministerial duties, and possibly requesting medical and psychological evaluation. The unanswered question is, what is "sufficient evidence" to indicate "further steps"? You may never acquire sufficient evidence. Are you going to let that priest continue in his pastoral duties while you gather more evidence, or decide that insufficient evidence is a reason not to take further action? I would argue that in order to protect children, the church and clergy have to be willing to make hard choices, between assuring that children are protected and trusting your brethren.

In the face of a suspicion or allegation of sexual abuse by a priest, one must act. Two principal choices and consequent courses of action may be taken: to choose to believe that the priest could not have abused and that the allegation is false; or to choose to believe that the priest may have abused and that the allegation is credible. Each course of action could be correct, but each choice also contains the possibility that it is incorrect. In the face of ambiguity where a choice must be made, ask yourself, which is the more tolerable error. Is the more tolerable error to respond as though the priest has not abused, when in fact he has, with the risk that a child or children may continue to be molested? Or is the more tolerable error to respond as though the priest may have abused, with the risk that an innocent man will suffer emotionally and professionally from that misjudgment?

The consequences of both errors are profound. Some situations are clearer than others and carry less risk of error. Other situations, perhaps most, are highly ambiguous and the risk of error is high. Under these circumstances, I would argue that the second error is the more tolerable. The costs to children both of continued abuse and of not being believed and protected are catastrophic. The costs to priests of being falsely accused are also high, but they are not children. They have greater resources and resiliency with which to understand and to recover from that blow.

It is also important to remember that these are preliminary rather than permanent decisions. Once the church accepts that an allegation must be acted upon, according to Article 4, the case is referred to the civil authorities. I believe that if priests are trained to understand the difficult

choices that must be made, and why allegations much be presumed credible in ambiguous situations, they will be able to accept the sacrifices an innocently accused priest must bear for the good of the community and the greater protection of children.

Now I would like to discuss what we can do to protect the children who are with us now and in the future. As parents, we can protect our children by being present at their activities where they might have contact with adults (Salter, 2003, pp. 223-226).

Institutions such as Boy Scouts of America have comprehensive policies for protecting children (Boy Scouts of America, 2001). Boy Scouts is a high-risk environment, just as a church is a high-risk environment, and their policies include screening practices for leadership selection, youth protection training for all leaders and volunteers, sexual abuse prevention education for their scouts, and the requirement that no scout leader can be alone with a child. These policies protect not only children, but also those who work with children. Such a careful and comprehensive policy is important for the church as well. You have to assume that anyone with access to children, along with the potential for privacy and secrecy, can prey on children. Don't allow the privacy. Don't provide the opportunities. If parents are involved routinely in activities that include children, both the children and the church will be better protected (Salter, ibid.).

To conclude, I would like to raise a different issue. As we have discussed, predators can be very deceptive. One of the issues I did not discuss is how difficult it is to detect deception. Studies of deception reveal that no one is very good at knowing when somebody is lying. When people are practiced liars they can fool just about everybody, because that is their job. They are good at it and they are successful, or they would not be able to abuse children. The most skilled detectors, such as secret service agents and police, under the best of circumstances, correctly detect deception about sixty percent of the time. For the rest of us the rate is random. In other words, we correctly detect deception about fifty percent of the time. And people who think they are really good at knowing when someone is lying are not any better than anyone else, they are just more insistent (Salter, 2003, p. 196).

Predators are deceptive. They are alluring. They can be kind and considerate. They may be pious. They may go out of their way to do good deeds. They flatter and seduce. Just as predators can lure you into believing that they are good priests, predators can also lure women into marriages where they and their children are abused. One of the tasks of

professionals who work with these women is to help them get out of dangerous relationships safely.

The church and its priests are also acknowledged to be in a marriage. One might argue that, through their cleverness and allure, some predatory priests have seduced the church into that marriage. In response to your own crisis, the Dallas Charter recognizes that some priests may need to be severed from the clerical state. In other words, the Dallas Charter authorizes the divorce of a priest not only from priestly duties, but also sometimes from the priesthood itself, in the service of protecting children and of protecting the church.

I would urge you to think about the meaning of divorce. If the church can contain people who have misled them and harmed their own, so in marriages women can be misled and they and their children harmed. If severing a priest's sacramental ties to the church is permissible when he has committed such grievous betrayal and harm, so too should such severing of marriage be permissible. Under these circumstances, a woman needs and deserves the support and comfort of her church.

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