Why the epidemic of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church?

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Reports and accusations of sexual abuses carried out by Roman Catholic priests against children and teenagers, mostly male, continue to flood the American media. On March 20 a former professional baseball player, Tom Paciorek, and three of his brothers charged a Detroit-area priest with systematically abusing them in the 1960s when they were adolescents. No charges can be laid because the statute of limitations on such crimes expired years ago, but the priest in question, now 63, was immediately removed from his position by Church officials.

The issue of sexual abuse by priests, which has never been too far out of the headlines over the past decade and a half, has emerged as a national scandal this year, thanks in part to the trial of defrocked priest John J. Geoghan Jr. in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on child molestation charges. More than 130 people have claimed that Geoghan fondled or raped them during the 30 years he served in Boston-area parishes. He was convicted in February and sentenced to 10 years in a state prison, the maximum allowable, for his fondling of a 10-year-old boy in 1991. Geoghan also faces more than 80 civil suits.

Geoghan's case created a furor in part due to the large number of his alleged offenses, but also because of revelations that Church officials, including Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, were aware of the priest's behavior from the mid-1980s and into the 1990s and merely shifted him from parish to parish. After the Catholic officialdom's role in protecting Geoghan became public, Law felt obliged to hand over the names of more than 80 priests accused of sexual abuse in the past 40 years, a reversal of Church policy.

The Geoghan trial and the tacit acknowledgment by the Boston archdiocese that it had covered up the abuses opened the floodgates. Since January, accusations against more than 200 priests in 13 states and the District of Columbia have been lodged and at least 55 priests in 17 dioceses have been removed, suspended, put on administrative leave or forced to resign or retire, among them the bishop of Palm Beach, Florida, Anthony O'Connell. Ironically, O'Connell had taken over the Palm Beach diocese in January 1998 after then-Bishop J. Keith Simons admitted to molesting five altar boys during the 1970s.

New accusations about past and more recent abuses (a 35-year-old Long Island priest pleaded guilty in March to having sex with a 13-year-old boy in 1999 and 2000) are emerging on nearly a daily basis. This, moreover, is not simply an American problem. The archbishop of Poznan in Poland was accused earlier this month of abusing seminarians (and stepped down March 28); the archbishop of Vienna was forced to resign in 1998 after similar accusations. The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland agreed this year to "pay the equivalent of $110 million to compensate thousands of victims of molestation in church-run schools and child care centers over most of the last century" (*New York Times*, March 20). Thirty French priests have been convicted in recent years of pedophile activities and 11 are currently in prison. In Australia a former Catholic brother was recently jailed for 10 years for a series of sexual assaults against young children from 1975 to 1999.

While the public discussion of sexual abuse by priests, at least in the US, only dates to 1985 (when a Louisiana priest confessed to molesting dozens of children and received a 20-year jail term), there is every reason to believe that the practices have gone on for a very long time.

In the past, victims largely kept silent about the abuse, out of shame or fear of the consequences. In more recent and litigious times, victims have reached settlements with the Church out of court. There have been an estimated 1,400 sexual abuse lawsuits launched against priests since 1985. In 1997 a jury awarded $120 million to victims in a sex abuse case against the Catholic Diocese of Dallas, which finally agreed to a $30 million settlement. The diocese went bankrupt and closed many of its agencies and schools. Eventual settlements in the Boston suits could also reach $100 million. In some cases insurance companies have balked at meeting the cost of large settlements, claiming the actions were deliberate and not covered by insurance.

Confronted with undeniable facts or confessions by priests, the Catholic Church has offered vague and blanket apologies. Pope John Paul II made his first comment on the abuse scandal March 21, observing that the Church "shows her concern for the victims and strives to respond in truth and justice to each of these painful situations."

In reality, the response of the Church hierarchy, at least until recently, has been to suppress the charges entirely when it could, deny them when it could not, and reach agreements with victims that often included guarantees of confidentiality when it could neither suppress nor deny the charges. As the background to the Geoghan case revealed, Church officials have ever been guided by one principle: institutional self-preservation.

Indeed, the Catholic Church would deserve condemnation simply on the basis of its decades-long indifference to the psychological and physical suffering of an unknown, but very large number of its youngest and most defenseless members.

The conduct of the priests guilty of molestation or other forms of sexual abuse cannot be excused or overlooked. The assaults on (mostly) pre- and post-pubescent boys, passing through a vulnerable and sexually confused stage in their lives, are reprehensible and cowardly. The psychological consequences must be all the more devastating when one considers the relationship involved: children and teenagers abused in the most intimate fashion by men they have been taught to revere and trust as the "representatives of Jesus on earth."

However, one cannot simply leave the matter there. As deplorable as the abusive priests' conduct is, we are not inclined in this case, as in any other, to attribute it, in the words of John Paul II, to the "mystery of evil." The priests in question are not monsters, they are human beings, some no doubt originally motivated to join the Church by idealism. They themselves are victims, of the Catholic Church itself.

The attempt by Church officials to blame the behavior on a few individual predators, overcome by evil, is absurd. That the abuse is a long-standing and worldwide phenomenon demonstrates it is not aberrant

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behavior, but something ingrained in the institution and its practices. Contrary to the pope's view, there is hardly any "mystery" whatsoever about the source of the misconduct: it emerges ineluctably from the inhuman and unnatural celibacy requirement and related medieval teachings and practices of the Church on human sexuality, associated with the doctrine of man's Original Sin. After decades, or perhaps centuries, of concealment, the psychologically perverse consequences of these teachings and practices have been exposed for all to see.

The crisis over sexual abuse by members of the priesthood underscores the profoundly reactionary and anachronistic character of the Catholic Church as an institution. Its corrupt and hypocritical officials, living like kings, preach against sin and vice, oppose birth control and abortion, inveigh against homosexuality, enthusiastically advocate censorship and intellectual repression, universally ally themselves with the powers that be and generally make life miserable for tens of millions of people.

This mass of social reaction and backwardness must find reflection in personal relationships both within the Church and between priests and parishioners.

There are a host of questions bound up with the abnormal psychology often found in the priesthood that are beyond the scope of this article. Eugene Kennedy, a former priest, now married, has written about the issue. In regard to previous sex abuse scandals, he writes about "revelations of the miserable, furtive, and immature personality growth of many priests, of which their preying, helplessly, on young boys, helpless, was a major symptom." That this often takes the form of abuse of boys, while in society at large girls are far more likely to be victims, has less to do with the percentage of homosexual men who enter the priesthood than it does, on the one hand, with the sexual opportunities available to those deprived of humane and healthy outlets and, on the other, with an institution characterized, in Kennedy's words, by "this movement of men to overcome other men."

He details the authoritarian and sadistic tendencies he came across within the Church officialdom, of men whose "sexually toned personality needs ... might horrify them if they identified these as their own drive to control or to dominate others." There is an obvious connection between all this and the notorious repression meted out in Catholic schools longer than there have been memoirs and novels to record it.

Every aspect of the sexual abuse crisis—the pain and suffering of the victims, the misery and sexual dysfunction of the priests, the callousness of Church officials—suggests a diseased institution whose practices and beliefs run counter to elementary human needs and inevitably breed the unhealthiest of psycho-sexual climates. The Catholic Church's essential being flies in the face of modern society.

The strict enforcement of priestly celibacy, it turns out, is of relatively recent origin. There is no reference in the New Testament to compulsory celibacy; in fact, all of the apostles were apparently married. Frederick Engels, in his essay, "On the History of Early Christianity," notes "a phenomenon common to all times of great agitation, that the traditional bonds of sexual relations, like all other fetters, are shaken off." As the Catholic Church consolidated itself as a state institution, its tolerance of sexual freedom decreased and its exaltation of virginity, as a condition closer to the divine, increased. The first systematic attempts to impose anti-marital laws within the Church took place in the fourth century, in the aftermath of Emperor Constantine's declaration that Christianity was henceforth the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Over the next number of centuries, pressures for celibacy grew, but by and large the Church failed to convince priests to abstain from sexual relations. By the tenth century, one historian notes: "Statistics are of course not available, but it is generally agreed that most rural priests were married, and that many urban clergy and bishops had wives and children." The most fervent advocate of celibacy was Gregory VII (1073-85), but the decisive step was taken at the Second Lateran Council in 1139. Priests became unmarriageable by definition, and those who had married after ordination were instructed to divorce. However, since the marriage ceremony was not yet entirely under Church jurisdiction, priests who married secretly continued to serve. This loophole was effectively closed in 1563 at the Council of Trent, which introduced the requirement that Christian marriages be witnessed by a priest.

The imposition of celibacy was met with open resistance. Church officials who attempted to enforce Gregory's decrees, for instance, were jeered at, spat upon and sometimes physically attacked. One clerical opponent argued that Gregory "was seeking to compel men to live like angels.... By opposing the normal course of nature, however, he was only promoting unchastity." Opposition to celibacy endured. Of course, one form it took came to be known as the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, who married in 1524, asserted there was no scriptural basis for celibacy.

Within the Church itself, many priests continued to ignore the ban on marriage. In Spain marriage among priests was apparently an established practice in the sixteenth century. Another historian writes that "Celibacy suffered setbacks during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which proclaimed in 1791 that no man should be prevented from marrying. Thousands of French priests took wives."

While the Catholic hierarchy's original opposition to priests marrying was no doubt conditioned by centuries of anti-sexual propaganda, it has quite worldly and material foundations, to be discovered principally in the question of Church land and property. The ability of priests and various Church officials to leave property to their heirs was of deep concern to Gregory and other popes. Clerics, in some cases, *owned* churches and monasteries and passed them on to children or siblings. Secular rule over Church property could extend for generations. This began to be a pressing issue during the tenth and eleventh centuries. It is not difficult to see why Gregory and his supporters denounced both lay proprietorship and clerical marriage.

Historians have asserted political concerns as well, for example, that depriving a priest of home and family tended to weaken his national feeling, ensured his subservience to the central authority in Rome and made him more of a malleable instrument in the hands of the papal autocracy.

None of this explains why the Catholic Church remains so adamantly committed to priestly celibacy today. After all, rationality would appear to be on the side of allowing priests to marry. An estimated 20,000 men left the priesthood in the US from 1970 to 1995, and an estimated 100,000 worldwide, mostly to marry. A 1990 US study of young Catholic men found celibacy to be the most significant obstacle to adopting the priestly life.

Celibacy and chastity, however, are bound up with the anti-rational, mystical construction of Catholic doctrine. The prejudice against sex ("sex pleasure has been ordained by God as an inducement to perform an act which is both disgusting in itself and burdensome in its consequences," declared a 1929 work by Catholic scholars, described as "humane"), Immaculate Conception, the virgin birth, the nonsense about the Holy Trinity and other pieces of Catholic teaching and dogma are indissolubly bound together. It is very difficult to remove one element without the entire edifice collapsing.

Indeed the more that humanity's knowledge of itself and its world has deepened, the more the Catholic Church has chosen to brazen it out on the doctrinal front. It continues to defend beliefs that are thoroughly undermined by science and technology, in reality, by the science and technology of a considerably earlier century. From the hierarchy's point of view, for the Church to abandon celibacy and other practices at this point would constitute an intolerable concession to rationalism and secularism.

It should be remembered that critical elements of Catholic dogma were

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only introduced or codified in the nineteenth century, including the doctrine of Immaculate Conception (the belief that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was the only person born free from "all stain of original sin") in 1854 and papal infallibility in 1870. The Church was consolidating and rearming itself in response to the intellectual menace represented by the Enlightenment, Darwinism and modernity in general, the threat of social revolution (European-wide upheaval took place in 1848 and the Paris Commune in 1871) and the growth of socialism. In 1878 Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical directed against the "deadly plague" promulgated by "socialists, communists, or nihilists," who were now proclaiming publicly "The overthrow of all civil society whatsoever."

Another factor no doubt involved in the defense of celibacy is the reality that since the Reformation it has been one of the issues dividing the Catholic Church from the various Protestant sects. A significant narrowing of this divide would raise the question: what distinguishes Catholicism?

Moreover, like any reactionary bureaucracy, especially one with such a vast breadth of experience, the Catholic officialdom instinctively recognizes that every outmoded institution is most vulnerable at the moment it attempts to reform itself. After vigorously preserving priestly celibacy for centuries, for the Church to abandon it might provoke an uncontrollable crisis. It would not satisfy genuinely reform-minded critics, and it would infuriate and embitter conservative elements. Far better to ignore the realities of modern life, place priests in an impossible position and endanger children and adolescents, Church officials calculate, than see the possible unraveling of the entire institution.

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