

Can psychology help a church in crisis?

A small group of psychologists says yes, asserting that psychology's science and practice can be part of the solution.

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The news reports of Catholic priests charged with sexually abusing adolescents have shocked thousands of Americans. But for a group of psychological experts, the recent events aren't just news, they're a call for help from psychology.

"Psychology can offer so much to the church, the public, victims and rank-and-file Catholics, as well as priests," says Thomas Plante, PhD, editor of "Bless Me Father for I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests" (Greenwood, 1999) and professor and chair of psychology at Santa Clara University.

"We can offer the best in science and the best in practice and let data cut through the hysteria," says Plante, who evaluates those entering religious life for necessary characteristics and for potential red flags, and treats victims and offenders in his practice.

Though the number of psychologists conducting research and treating clergy is small--"there's only about 15 of us in the Northeast," says Plante--psychologists can help prevent further abuse by recognizing risk factors in potential priests and collaborating with religious superiors.

"There are many roles for psychologists," says Gary Schoener, who has consulted on more than 3,000 cases of sexual misconduct by helping professionals--about 15 percent of which involved clergy.

What's the data?

Though limited, there are compelling data on sex-offending clergy. Experts estimate that about 2 to 6 percent of Catholic priests have been sexually involved with minors. Since there are about 60,000 priests and brothers in the Catholic Church, Plante estimates that approximately 4,000 priests are at risk for sexual involvement with minors.

The problem isn't, of course, limited to Catholics; the same estimates apply to clergy from other religious traditions. Most victims in other denominations are girls and women. Research on sex offenses in the Catholic Church has shown, however, that around 80 percent of priests who have abused minors are ephebophiles, who target post-pubescent adolescent boys.

"We're dealing with something that is in another category besides pedophilia," says Donna Markham, PhD, president of Southdown Institute in Ontario, a treatment center that provides inpatient and outpatient care for church professionals. "Some real distinctions need to be made here," she adds. There is no DSM category for ephebophiles.

And, notes Plante, research findings with clergy offenders are different from findings with sex offenders in general. "There are big differences in IQ--the average is about 125 for priests," he says. That's higher than for general sex offenders. The offending priests also tend to be older--in their late fifties.

The prognosis for pedophile priests is poor and the likelihood of reoffending is high, says Markham. The outlook for ephebophiles, she says, is more "hopeful." Leslie Lothstein, PhD, who frequently works with priests as director of psychology for the Institute of Living in Hartford, Conn., agrees, adding that the prognosis is "substantially better" for ephebophiles. He also notes that outcome meta-analyses reflect a 15 percent relapse rate for sex offenders. "These rates are acceptably low, which suggests that a combination of treatments is working," he says.

Getting at the root of the problem

Understanding why clergy, specifically priests, abuse minors is a complex task. "There are a lot of myths and misperceptions right now," says Bill Mochon, PsyD, a Los Angeles psychologist who facilitates group sessions for priests. Plante agrees, noting that some of the media hype leads people to blame celibacy. "If someone can't have sex for whatever reason, they aren't necessarily going to make children the object of their desire," Plante says.

He adds that another myth is that the problems are somehow related to homosexuality. "We know that sexual orientation doesn't predict sex crimes against minors. That doesn't quite hold water," he says.

There are recognizable risk factors, though. Clergy who abuse minors were typically abused themselves. Many have poor social skills and poor impulse control. And, say experts, many sex-offender clergy have co-morbid disorders. "A lot have major affective disorders, personality disorders or substance abuse problems," says Plante.

Markham and Mochon also point to priests' sexual development for possible answers. "Many priests entered seminary before they reached mature psychosexual development. For some men, the institutional life in the same-sex environment may have served to further postpone social and sexual development," says Markham. "For these men, at the age of their ordination in their mid- to late twenties, they were intellectually and physically adults, but emotionally they remained far younger," she says.

Plante notes, however, that men entering the priesthood are older now--around 30--and may have had previous relationships.

Mochon, who graduated from a Roman Catholic seminary, adds: "In seminary, we were never taught about sexuality. It was assumed that we had dealt with that stuff earlier. A lot of priests have to check their human sexuality at the door."

So, not only do many priests feel conflicted about their sexuality, but they may be suspended in an immature emotional state, too. And immaturity tends to be a common characteristic of men who engage in inappropriate sexual behavior with adolescents, experts note.

Psychology's role

To help combat sexual disorders and other problems in the church, psychologists have worked with priests and other clergy members for years in various roles. Lothstein and Markham both work in centers where priests are either sent by superiors or choose to go on their own for help with various problems, some of which are sexual. Treatment for sexual disorders is tailored for individuals but can include cognitive-behavioral and psychodynamic therapy and pharmacology, notes Lothstein, who works at the Institute of Living--the only secular facility that treats Catholic priests.

He runs a group program for professionals--including priests, therapists and physicians--twice a week on intimacy and sexuality. Mochon and Lothstein both note the importance of helping priests develop healthy, nonsexual intimate relationships. "The therapy is not just stopping them [from abusing] but helping them develop social maturity and the capacity to connect to others," says Lothstein.

Aside from the clinical work of treating impaired clergy or their victims, psychologists can work to help prevent further abuse, says Schoener. Some areas where psychology can make a difference include:

- **Pre-ordination assessments and evaluations.** Many churches mandate screening. Psychologists have been doing this, yet not all have done it well, says Schoener, who is executive director of the Walk-In Counseling Center in Minneapolis. Tests like the MMPI- 2, the 16PF and the California Personality Inventory are used and can be helpful. However, warn both Lothstein and Schoener, tests can't be used alone. "Assessment tools are not predictive instruments," says Lothstein. Psychologists involved in screening must know the risk factors for sexual mis conduct in clergy and how to look for them. And psychologists have to follow up with church officials. Many times, assessments have failed because church superiors weren't told how to interpret psychologists' reports, notes Schoener.
- **Consulting for churches and religious groups.** In addition to doing assessments, psychologists can consult with bishops about priests who may be having problems. For example, would a particular priest be more suited to work in a retreat center rather than a parish? Psychologists can facilitate priest-wellness groups, says Schoener. He notes that in some states, insurance carriers have paid for these groups. And, Plante notes, psychologists can work with parishes, too. "They can do Q&As about issues," especially given the current crisis, he says.
- **Educational training.** Workshops on how to maintain appropriate boundaries, recognize risk factors for behavioral problems and manage challenging parishioners would be helpful, says Plante. Appropriately trained psychologists might offer leadership skills training, such as managing organizational change, building teams and managing conflict.
- **Research.** "My hope is that psychologists will engage in some substantive research that looks at implications

and prognosis" for sex-offending clergy, says Markham. "We need some good, solid information out there."

But, "simply throwing psychology at the problem won't help," says Schoener. Most experts agree that psychologists who work with religious groups need to understand what's involved in public ministry and how particular religious groups work. For example, those working with Roman Catholics need to know what strengths are needed to lead a celibate life or live in a religious community.

"I think it's necessary to have a multicultural perspective," says Mochon, who informally teaches other psychologists about Catholicism. "Catholicism is a culture. Priesthood is a subculture. Working with this culture requires a certain level of knowledge and sensitivity."

He adds: "Psychologists already possess a level of knowledge that we're not finding from the media, or even some bishops. With some tweaking, psychology can be part of the solution."

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