

Clergy Sexual Abuse: Facts, Myths and Questions

By Rev. Thomas J. Reese, SJ

Second of two parts; 15th in a series.

Myths About the Church

Myth: The abuse is a result of the seminary training after the Second Vatican Council (1963-65). *Fact:* Almost 70 percent of the abusive priests were ordained before 1970, after attending pre-Vatican II seminaries or seminaries that had had little time to adapt to the reforms of Vatican II.

Myth: This problem is unique to the Catholic Church. *Fact:* The John Jay report notes that in the period 1992-2000, the number of substantiated sexual abuse cases in American society as a whole has been between 89,355 and 149,800 annually. At a minimum, this number for one year is eight times the total number of alleged abuses in the church over a period of 52 years.

Myth: The abuse is still going on at the same rate. *Fact:* The number of alleged abuses increased in the 1960's, peaked in the 70's, declined in the 80's and by the 90's had returned to the levels of the 1950's.

Myth: The Catholic Church has been slower to respond to this crisis than the rest of American society. *Fact:* The John Jay study reports that for the country as a whole the number of substantiated sexual abuse cases peaked at approximately 149,800 in 1992 and declined by 2 percent to 11 percent per year through 2000. Since sexual abuse in the church appears to have peaked in the 1970's and declined in the 80's and 90's, the church seems to have been ahead of the rest of American society.

Myth: Billions of dollars have been spent by the church dealing with this crisis. *Fact:* Though the cost may eventually reach a billion dollars, the figure reported by John Jay was \$472,507,094.

Myth: The church is spending more money on treating priests and hiring lawyers than on the victims. *Fact:* 83 percent of the amount spent by the church went to compensation for victims; another 4 percent went to treatment for victims.

Myth: The church knew about these allegations from the very beginning. *Fact:* According to the John Jay report, one-third of the accusations were made in the years 2002-3. Two-thirds have been reported since 1993. "Thus, prior to 1993, only one-third of cases were known to church officials," says the report.

Myth: The bishops should leave this problem to the criminal justice system. *Fact:* When allegations were made known to the police, only one in three accused priests was charged with a crime; only 3 percent of all priests with allegations served prison time. There seems to be no correlation between the severity of the offense and whether the alleged victim contacted the police or whether the priest was ultimately charged or convicted, according to the report.

Myth: The abusive priests always/never received treatment. *Fact:* Nearly 40 percent of priests alleged to have committed sexual abuse participated in treatment programs. The more allegations a priest had, the more likely he was to participate in treatment, according to the report.

More Research Needed

The John Jay report, which covers the period of 1950-2002, is an excellent first step in the research on this problem, but it raises

as many questions as it answers:

- 4,392 priests (4 percent of the clergy) were accused of sexual abuse. Is this better or worse than other professions — teachers, social workers, scout leaders, doctors, lawyers, psychologists — or the total male population? No one knows, because comparable studies have not been done.

- 10,667 individuals reported abuse. Are there more victims? Definitely. The bishops could report only on those who had come forward. One-third of the allegations were reported in 2002-3. How many more are out there?

- A few serial abusers (147) were responsible for a quarter of all allegations. Why were these men not spotted and dealt with by other priests and church officials?

- More than half the priests had only one allegation against them. Is this because their names were never made public, or were they truly one-time offenders? Would it be safe to return any of these men to ministry?

- The number of alleged abuses increased in the 1960s, peaked in the '70s, declined in the '80s and by the '90s were at the levels of the 1950s. Were there more cases prior to 1960 that simply were not reported or recorded? Will there be more cases reported for the '90s as time goes on? Or did most bishops get their act together in the late '80s, so that most abusers were dealt with and potential abusers were not ordained?

- Fewer religious priests (2.5 percent) had allegations against them than diocesan priests (4.3 percent). Is the "Lone Ranger" model of priestly life detrimental to the life of celibacy?

- Eighty-one percent of the victims were male. Why? What role does homosexuality play in this crisis? There is no hard data on what percentage of the clergy is homosexual, because the bishops refuse to allow such a study.

- Was there a higher incidence of abuse by priests who entered the seminary at a younger age --- that is, who entered high school seminaries — compared with those who entered college or post-college seminaries?

- Did the treatment programs to which abusive priests were sent have an impact on reducing abuse?

What Next?

The John Jay report can be only the beginning, not the end, of research on the problem of sexual abuse in the church. The more the problem is studied, the more likely it is that the church will change from being part of the problem to being part of the solution to the epidemic of sexual abuse in our country, where 20 percent of women and 15 percent of men report that they were victims of child sexual abuse as children, with about 80 percent of the victims saying they were violated by a family member.

Jesuit Father Thomas J. Reese is the former editor in chief of America Magazine. This article is reprinted from America, Mar. 22, 2004 with the permission of America Press, Inc. (c) 2004. All rights reserved. For subscription information, visit www.americamagazine.org.