

Treating priests who abuse: Then and now

Ninth in a series.

Why would a bishop let a priest continue to serve in ministry knowing the priest had been credibly accused of abusing a minor? How could he in good conscience simply give that priest another assignment?

These questions have been posed over and over again since the January 2002 Boston Globe article broke the story of the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. Since that time, the media have been relentless in repeating this accusation. With this barrage of attention, the Catholic faithful have picked up the mantra, “Why would a bishop reassign a priest when he knew the priest had been identified as a perpetrator?”

Is there a plausible explanation for such episcopal conduct? There is indeed an explanation, if this question can be placed in a historical context. The media, with their repetitive approach to emphasizing the wrongdoing of the Catholic hierarchy in this regard, have failed to address some of the underlying historical realities that made such decisions by bishops understandable. The media have continued to blur timelines, thus bearing responsibility for resultant misinformation.

In the period prior to the 1980s, society at large was ignorant of the compulsive nature of the sexual abuse of minors by a perpetrator. One author has called the period before the 1980s the “dark ages of sexual abuse.” Certainly society and the bishops recognized the seriousness and the sinfulness of sexual abuse of minors, but, as with other psychological problems, stern warnings, self-discipline and medical treatment were seen as solutions. If a priest expressed sincere sorrow and a commitment to “sin no more,” bishops — trained as pastors and not therapists — were inclined to forgive the priest, send him away for a retreat and refer him for counseling.

After an offender underwent treatment, often bishops were informed by the therapist or spiritual director that the priest could return to limited ministry and, in some cases, were told the priest could return to full-time ministry. Placing trust in the expertise of those trained in

the field of sexual abuse of minors seemed the responsible approach to addressing the issue at that time.

Against the backdrop of today’s understanding of sexual disorders, the decision to return abusing clergy to ministry seems incomprehensible. However, one must be reminded that growth in research in the field of sexual disorders has been significant in recent decades. The media have rarely discriminated between methods used in the handling of cases of sexual misconduct prior to the 1980s and those methods employed since that time.

In their outright condemnation of the bishops’ actions, the media show little inclination to educate the public on how new research on sexual disorders has changed the treatment of these disorders. Each decade has seen advances in research that can help society to better comprehend the nature, complexity and extent of sexual abuse. What was once thought to be “curable” is now understood to be “incurable.” These factors are critical to answering the question of why some bishops in the past reassigned priests accused of sexual misconduct. New understandings have led to new decisions. Ongoing research will likely produce even greater understanding and more sophisticated treatment.

One might ask, where are the Catholic therapists, counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists? Do they not have a professional responsibility to help the public understand how the treatment of sexual disorders has changed? Why are they mostly silent? These professionals frequently advised the bishops in the past to reassign accused priests pronouncing them cured. It is time for the media and the therapists to clarify the picture, to step forward and admit that the treatment of sexual disorders has progressed.

Catholic hierarchy, with the assistance of trained therapists, are utilizing new findings in the handling of sexual offenders. These truths must be told. The goal will always be to protect all God’s children and vulnerable adults so that history will not be repeated.