

Forum

UNDERSTANDING THE ABUSE EPIDEMIC

BY PAUL MCHUGH

The writer is university distinguished service professor of psychiatry and professor in the department of mental health in the Bloomberg School of Public Health of the Johns Hopkins University.

FEW PEOPLE expected what a national study revealed Friday about the sexual abuse of minors by Roman Catholic priests. An epidemic springing up early in the 1960s reached tidal-wave proportions in the 1970s and early 1980s.

How could we have missed such an onslaught for so long? Yes, the abuse was secret, and yes, victims took years to report. But to be unaware of an epidemic engulfing no fewer than 10,000 victims until 2002, when *The Boston Globe* reported widespread abuse, is dumbfounding.

But the work is not finished. Now, a further, close study — likely to reveal as much about our society as about the Catholic Church in America — has to be undertaken.

First the background: *The Globe* revealed that predatory priests in Boston were allowed to continue preying on youngsters in their charge and brought to light similar cases in other Catholic communities. The bishops — the responsible and now humiliated administrators of the Catholic Church — met in June 2002 in Dallas and, directed by their far-seeing leader Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, Ill., created a charter in which they proposed not only to care for victims but to unearth the “nature and scope” of these crimes and ultimately to discover their “causes and context.”

They drew 13 men and women from the Catholic laity (including me) into a National Review Board to oversee this plan and to commission reputable — preferably secular — public-health investigators to carry it out. We selected the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York to conduct the descriptive study (“nature and scope”) of the problem which they now present.

The study rests on a survey of church records of credible claims of abuse since 1950. These records were surprisingly thorough but could only identify victims who reported their abuse. The John Jay observations thus suffer from what public-health workers call “reporting bias.” The investigators must acknowledge that a pool of victims of unknown size exists outside their accounting and might never come to light.

They also identified other potentials for inaccuracy, as befits a reputable group of social scientists aware of “informational biases” that could affect their observations. These stemmed from concerns about the completeness of the records (particularly the older ones of the 1950s), the thoroughness of effort in every diocese to respond to the

investigators’ queries and the absence of double-checking.

However, one can have confidence in the John Jay conclusions. They received most remarkable cooperation from the diocesan bishops — 97 percent answered the survey and reported their records. And each diocesan audit proceeded independently without knowledge of the results or modes of response from others.

Irregularities in the quality of records across dioceses or misrepresentations of the events by defensive administrators would produce an irregular image with many conspicuous “outliers” to any trend. Yet the picture emerging is uniform across the nation. The number of victims correlates with the size of the Catholic population in each diocese — more people, more victims. The percentage of predatory priests remains rather constant across dioceses.

Confidence in the John Jay study grows when one compares the report with a Jan. 12, 2003, article in *The New York Times* that described the number of abusive priests revealed in public records since 1960. A test of the John Jay report’s accuracy would be whether it increased the overall number of cases by drawing on private records as *The New York Times* could not. The results show that it does, more than doubling the percentage of predatory priests (from 1.8 percent to about 4 percent) and greatly increasing the number of victims.

And John Jay confirms what *The New York Times* only suspected. The record of the abuse has an epidemic or “outbreak” character, rather than one suggesting an ever-present abusive proclivity in celibate Catholic priests. By extending its enumeration further back to the 1950s, John Jay was able to show that the Catholic clergy of the 1950s was comparatively free of predators.

The report discloses that beginning late in that decade or in the early 1960s, dioceses began to hear about priests who were sexually abusing children and in numbers never seen before. These complaints increased steadily over the next decade and a half so that in the mid-1970s and early 1980s several hundred priests per year were discovered. Since then — essentially in the past 20 years — a steady decline in reports suggests a dwindling of the epidemic (although one must consider “reporting bias,” given the time lag between abuse and victim complaints). Now, close to 4,400 priests have been credibly reported as abusers of children over the past 50 years.

Beyond these numbers, the John Jay study reveals other remarkable features of this epidemic. Most noteworthy, from the 1950s on, the numbers of abused girls or children younger than age 11 were small and changed little.

The epidemic that ultimately engulfed thousands of victims affected boys age 11 and older (post-pubescent, adolescent males) who were three to four times more likely than other children to be victims.

Although the number of identified victims falls short of the true total, discovering more victims would not alter these prime facts.

Roman Catholic priests were the agents of a huge and unprecedented behavioral epidemic of homosexual predation on young males, many under their pastoral care, and the epidemic went relatively unrecognized through the 1970s and 1980s. The epidemic appears to be abating — for reasons that are as inexplicable as those for its onset — even as concern for the discovery and treatment of individual victims continues.

With these prime facts confidently identified, the National Review Board has achieved the main purpose of the “nature and scope” study — the first and descriptive step in this investigation. Now our board must take the second step and commission analytic work to reveal the “causes and context” of this epidemic. We have gathered testimony from people who were in some way witnesses to the crisis, and we reported this testimony Friday.

These observers point to problems in the oversight of priests, as in their recruitment, education and post-ordination life. But failures of oversight do not answer such questions as, why these priests became predators, why they were able to find so many victims, or why this predation exploded in these particular decades of the 20th Century.

To answer those questions, we need analytic enterprises with expertise comparable to John Jay’s. An analytic work of this type could illuminate such important issues as the vulnerability of victims, provocative traits in predators, and motivating characteristics of the culture. At the moment our board (and indeed all our witnesses) can offer nothing more than educated guesses about such hidden causes of this epidemic.

In Dallas, the bishops called for help. They believed then — and must believe more strongly now — that they need information to terminate the crisis, protect children, heal the injured, and reduce rampant speculation about the causes.

They must press ahead bravely — notwithstanding their natural sense of shame over this matter — with what is the first systematic study of sexual abuse of minors in public-health history. This pioneering work would reveal to them how to prevent any repetition of this abuse of their people. Indeed, all American citizens could learn from their efforts how to protect children, wherever they are in life.

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