Creating an Ethos within the Parish that Is Sensitive to the Adult Victim of Childhood Sexual Abuse

By

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Statement of the Problem

The sexual abuse of children is frequently overlooked because of its painful ramifications on family systems and society as a whole. Until the early 1970’s, childhood sexual abuse was thought to be a rare occurrence, prevalent only in rural areas or among the poor. Most experts agree that childhood sexual abuse occurs within all socio-economic groups and exists in all cultural groups. Public awareness of the problem has led to an increase in the reporting of childhood sexual abuse. However, it remains vastly unreported — an estimated 90% is never disclosed or reported. Of the disclosed reports, one in four girls is sexually abused before the age of eighteen; and one in six boys is sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Sexually abused children, for the most part, know their abuser. One study of three states discovered that 96% of reported rape survivors under the age of 12 knew the perpetrator. Four percent of the offenders were strangers, 20% were fathers, 16% were relatives, and 50% were acquaintances or friends of the victims. The literature clearly shows that children are sexually abused in a familiar environment, either in their home or in the home of an acquaintance, and that the abuser is a relative, a friend, or someone the child knows. It is an uncommon occurrence for a child to be sexually molested by a stranger.

Myths Regarding Sexual Mistreatment of Children

There are countless myths surrounding incest and the sexual mistreatment of children. Such myths are detrimental to victims’ claims of abuse. It is easier to dismiss someone’s claim of being a victim of abuse, than to deal with the horrendous reality of the abuse, together with the familial and societal ramifications.

People continue to believe that incest is a geographical phenomenon — that there are certain areas in the United States where incest is regarded as normal. Social, economic, religious, ethnic, or geographical factors have nothing to do with incest.

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2 Ibid.
5 Langan and Harlow, Crime, 45.
6 Ibid., 46.
one who commits incest is not a clinically psychotic person. He or she is generally well regarded and can carry himself or herself quite well in the community.

Another myth posits that incest occurs only once or twice. Most incest happens for years and occurs with several children. It was even thought that incest was but another harmless addition to deviant pornographic materials, like sado-masochism magazines. The following conclusions were published in the literature in the recent past:

- Incest hardly ever happens, perhaps one or two in a million people.
- When child sexual abuse does take place, it does not generally seem to hurt the child, and there is no reason that it should; indeed, the experience of incest can create attractive and erotically competent young people.
- Children often invite and participate in sexual abuse, even initiating it in a seductive and aggressive manner to satisfy their unconscious sexual impulses.
- Children and women who make accusations of sexual assault are often lying, fantasizing, or mentally disturbed.
- Those men who do commit sexual crimes are for the most part deviant drifters who are mentally ill and in need of compassion and treatment, certainly not respectable fathers of families; we should not overreact to them or punish them too severely.
- Women who focus on sexual crimes by men are castrators, “latent” lesbians, prudes, or otherwise sexually abnormal; they hate men and take pleasure in humiliating them by making such accusations.
- When incest does take place, it is the mother’s fault, whether because of collusion, neglect, or because she facilitates incest between her passive husband and her seductive daughter, in order to express maternal hostility against the girl and satisfy her own latent homosexual longing for her daughter.
- There are many societies reported by anthropologists in which children engage freely in sex with each other and with adults and are sexually healthier than the inhibited and sexually pathetic Americans.

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7 Ibid., 47.
• These published findings may seem foolish now. However, the thinking of the time was guided by such conclusions. They support a contention that victims are still in many ways not believed.

**Forms of Sexual Abuse Within The Family System**
Incest is an ugly word, and most people prefer not to think of it. Incest is illegal in all fifty states, with penalties ranging from fines to many years in prison. Most people react with horror when hearing about incest. Nevertheless, in spite of our disgust, incest occurs every day and more often than one would imagine. The legal definition of incest is sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that marriage is prohibited by law.

Most cases are those of parents having sex with their children and sex between siblings. Sexual abuse of children can also occur in ways that do not fall under the legal definition of incest. Sex between a stepfather and stepdaughter is not legally considered incest; hence, a stepfather could not be charged with the crime of incest if he is having sex with his stepchildren. The same can be said of foster parents and foster children.

People using sexually abusive activity can eventually lead to intercourse. There can be months or years of exhibitionism, masturbation, petting, and even oral sex before any intercourse occurs. Legally, none of this could be called incest.

Same-sex sexual behavior: father-son, mother-daughter, brother-brother, sister-sister; is not considered incest because the legal definition of intercourse involves sex between a male and a female. One finds very little in the literature when it comes to incest, because it is rarely reported.

The sexual mistreatment of children goes far beyond the legal definition of incest. Incest, in terms of its legal definition, is by far the end of a process of horrendous treatment of a child.

Because incest is so closely hidden within the family structure, hard data about it is difficult to find. Incest is under-reported and under-treated. For every case that is reported, an estimated twenty-five go unreported; and for every five reported cases, only two receive treatment. The literature appears to support the notion that sexual abuse in families is an occurrence often ignored.

**Sexual Betrayal**
In the late 1990s, psychologist Richard Gartner undertook pioneering work in the area of childhood sexual abuse, concentrating on male sexual abuse. He noted that much work had been done in the area of female sexual abuse and suspected that boys endure just about as much abuse as girls do.

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10 Geiser, *Hidden*, 43.
In the early 1990s, the mindset of clinical practitioners was that men who came forward with stories of sexual abuse were actually relating accounts of sexual fantasy and unmet desires. More work has been done in the area of childhood sexual abuse, and as a result there has been a movement away from thinking that childhood sexual abuse is the result of fantasy. Recent scholarship recognizes childhood sexual abuse for what it truly is: sexual betrayal.

Sexual betrayal goes far beyond the conventional terms of incest and sexual abuse. When one is betrayed, one is violated on many levels. It is very much an interpersonal experience. Betrayal violates bonds that were thought to be unbreakable and/or sacred. Profound duplicity is introduced and bonds of trust are shattered. The one betrayed feels torn, ripped apart, and utterly broken. Trusted relationships are destroyed. Betrayal is “a violation not only of trust and of the other, but of the sanctity of intimate relationships.” Gartner’s work showed that sexual betrayal is profoundly devastating for both men and women.

**Societal Denial of Sexual Abuse**

Incest and the sexual abuse of children have long been taboo and misunderstood subjects in popular culture and in clinical literature. Society has, for decades, denied the sexual victimization of children. The more we continue to refute the accusations of victims, particularly within the family system, the more victims will remain hopelessly silent.

Victims’ silence is encouraged by a society in which “teachers, doctors, mental health specialists, police investigators, prosecutors, judges, juries, everyone in the adult world finds some logical reason to defend the adult against the distress of the child.” If we acknowledge how common incest really is, then we must question the inviolability of the family, the one place where children are supposed to be protected from harm. We speak of protecting the sanctity of the family in order to protect our children. Or we look to the traditional family as the environment best suited for children. However, we fail to listen to the pleas of those who have been sexually abused as children, and do not want to acknowledge the harsh reality that the problem of child sexual abuse is rampant within the confines of family environments.

In the 1980s, when the notion of the paucity of incest was being challenged, a movement began as an attempt to debunk the many victims who were beginning to come forward. A growing body of research and clinical literature began demonstrating that child abuse victims were unable to recognize the real extent of the damage inflicted

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13 Ibid., 13.

upon them until they were adults.\textsuperscript{15} Children do not always come forward with accounts of their abuse because for the most part an adult, who wields more power, is subjugating them.

Armed with the growing awareness of abuse in their past, a group of abuse victims, in the middle 1980s, attempted to hold their abusers accountable for their actions by asking courts of law to compensate them for abuse related injuries. Although they had credible accounts with reliable corroboration, their lawsuits were dismissed because of the statute of limitations. However, through advocacy and lobbying, sexual abuse victims managed to have some states extend the statute of limitations, but only for civil suits.\textsuperscript{16}

Accused parents, especially those of wealth and status, responded to these growing accusations by developing a new concept to explain the delayed memories of sexual abuse. Lawyers and psychological experts advanced “False Memory Syndrome” as a means of explaining why so many people took so long to bring forth their stories of abuse. The Syndrome, along with its development, gave the appearance of credibility by surrounding itself with psychological experts and other professionals. Yet it was never subject to the rigors of any type of research. Even more, an organization called “False Memory Syndrome Foundation” was established, whose members were comprised of parents who were concerned that their own children would sue them.\textsuperscript{17}

The definition of False Memory Syndrome was never based on the result of clinical studies. It evolved from accounts made by parents who claim to be falsely accused by their children. After being pressed by many research personnel, the Foundation officially offered the following as a definition of False Memory Syndrome: When a memory is distorted, or confabulated, the result can be what has been called the False Memory Syndrome – a condition in which a person’s identity and interpersonal relationships are centered around a memory of traumatic experience which is objectively false but in which the person strongly believes … False Memory Syndrome is especially destructive because the person assiduously avoids confrontation with any evidence that might challenge the memory. Thus it takes on a life of its own, encapsulated, and resistant to correction.\textsuperscript{18}

To date, no data suggests that such a syndrome exists. Its conception, along with the formation of the Foundation, appears to be an attempt to discredit accusation that adults were making of incidents of sexual abuse that transpired in childhood. The

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Dallam, \textit{Crisis}, 16.
Foundation claimed that off-the-wall counselors and therapists were instilling “false memories” of sexual abuse in the minds of their patients, making the credibility of the patients’ claims of sexual abuse suspect.

Society does not want to acknowledge the grim reality of childhood sexual abuse. Every day, children are sexually abused. These children eventually grow into adults. There is an estimated 60 million survivors of sexual abuse in America today.  

**Denial and Childhood Sexual Abuse**

Denial is a way for sexually abused children to protect themselves from the horrific trauma inflicted upon them. The painful experience is hidden away from the consciousness of the abused as means of protecting the general well-being of the child. This is merely a temporary solution, until realization of the sexual trauma can be released in an affective expression.

A physical trauma I experienced has similar bearing on the emotional trauma of sexual abuse. In my younger days I was an avid racquetball player. While in the midst of playing a game, I landed incorrectly on my foot, causing a complete rupture of my Achilles tendon. The sound of the tendon snapping in two was very similar to that of a rubber band breaking. I fell down, saw my foot dangling at an unnatural angle, and then fainted. However, before passing out, I clearly remember not feeling any pain.

I recounted this experience to the surgeon who did the repair. He told me that the body, when experiencing severe physical trauma, will generate massive amounts of adrenalin to temporarily dull the pain, with the subsequent fainting occurring to further shield the body from experiencing the pain.

Similarly, the child who is sexually abused learns to deny the experience in order to protect himself or herself from such terrible pain. When physical trauma occurs, the natural reaction is to seek treatment, to alleviate the pain, and to take the necessary steps to ensure healing. However, a child who is sexually abused feels alone in their pain.

Children are usually sexually abused by someone they love, trust, or know. The adult who wields more power physically and emotionally often threatens them with humiliation, punishment, seclusion, or even injury. Often, there are many layers of denial that need to be peeled away in order for the feelings to come forward. Self-confidence is eroded, the child often feels at fault and worthless. Denial appears to be the only recourse for coping and actually helps a child to survive into adulthood. However, as an adult, if the denial is not dealt with, it can lead to a variety of social, psychological, and even physical problems.

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Conclusion

For a variety of reasons, adults are ready to speak about sexual abuse they suffered as children. Within the context of a parish, there is an opportunity to reach to adults coming to terms with sexual abuse from their childhood. Ministers in a parish are given the opportunity to accompany people in dealing with an array of issues. A competent pastoral minister can listen, be attentive to, and offer appropriate responses. The pastor, along with other pastoral leaders, can certainly be in tune with the need of the parish in general. However, because of the many responsibilities a pastor has, there is a limiting effect on reaching out to the adult coming to terms with being sexually abused as a child.

Although any parish has a list of resources to help a parishioner in need, attending to and ministering to the adult victim of sexual abuse entails much more than a social outreach. The parish community could play a role in helping the pastor and other parish leaders to reach out to the adult coming to terms with the devastation of being sexually abused as a child by creating an environment of comfort and safety, where healing can take place.

The model parish community reaches out to its members with God’s love, embracing the plight of the poor, the spiritually hungry, and anyone desiring to deepen his or her relationship with God. Every parish has an ethos that defines it, an ethos that either consciously or sub-consciously invites people to come forward and receive God blessings through the ministry of its leaders and members.

There are diocesan programs and policies in place to ensure the creation of a safe environment for children and young people participating in parish activities. Yet, very little is available for adults. Some type of ministerial outreach on the parish level that embraces adults dealing with sexual abuse is in order. Someone coming to terms with the devastating effects of being a victim may have nowhere else to turn. A parish community aware of the problem of sexual abuse of its members is the desired outcome.