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## 'Who Wears the Face of God?': Childhood Sexual Abuse by Catholic Priests as Religious Violence

Emma Christen

*University of Puget Sound*, [echristen@pugetsound.edu](mailto:echristen@pugetsound.edu)

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'Who Wears the Face of God?': Childhood Sexual Abuse by Catholic Priests as  
Religious Violence

**Introduction**

Childhood sex abuse by Catholic priests is an epidemic that has been rising to the surface in the public eye over the past decade, with hundreds of cases going public in the United States and even more in places like England and Ireland. Buried beneath conversations surrounding the cover-ups, scandals and court cases, however, are those who lived through this abuse. So many casual and scholarly conversations focus on the huge scale of the problem, or the amount of bishops who knew there were abusive priests in their parishes, or the silencing tactics used by church officials to ensure that victim-survivors or their families would not report—in conversations like these, it seems that the victims and their stories are forgotten. This paper will focus on the victim-survivors first, including their stories and their voices whenever possible, addressing the ways in which abuse affected their lives.

Much scholarship has contributed to the question of how and why priests abuse, from angles such as theology or psychology. Slightly fewer pieces of work have focused on the question of how victim-survivors have been impacted by this particular form of abuse, but articles and portions of books have been dedicated to the topic nonetheless. In addition, many prominent theorists have explored the idea of “religious violence,” mostly in relation to religiously motivated terrorist attacks.

This paper aims to put these two categories of scholarship in conversation with each other, in order to argue that child sexual abuse by priests in the Catholic Church

should be considered religious violence, on the same level as religiously motivated terrorist attacks. I argue that labeling priest abuse as religious violence would provide validation for victim-survivors' experiences of religious trauma, and more effectively distinguish between abuse perpetrated by priests and non-priests.

In arguing this, I will explore many facets of the issue, including the specifically religious trauma that affects victim-survivors of this abuse. The religious rhetoric used by priests before and during abuse, as well as church teachings about the divine power a priest holds, creates a religious dimension to the post-traumatic stress that survivors of any kind of sexual violence experience. Added onto this—if a victim-survivor reported their abuse—is the denial, silencing and manipulation of members of church hierarchy such as bishops and archbishops, who were more focused on protecting their institution than the children of their church. This sense of being blamed could lead to a feeling of betrayal by the church, and even by God. Thus, victim-survivors of priest abuse experience not only an attack on their physical body, psyche, and emotions, but their sense of spirituality and religion as well.

The fact that childhood sexual abuse by priests is not seen as religious violence points to the ways in which the construction of the term “religious violence” is meant to serve particular political narratives within an American and general Western context. In William T. Cavanaugh's book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, he discusses how the Western world benefits from the idea of religious violence: it creates a dichotomy between the “secular” violence of Western countries, which is rational and peace-loving, and the “religious” violence of non-

Western countries, which is irrational and divisive.<sup>1</sup> In constructing my own argument, I agree with Cavanaugh's argument that the category of religious violence exists primarily to serve these narratives. In this case, I suggest that adjusting the perception and definition of religious violence to better fit priest abuse would provide a closer vision of true religious violence, rather than allowing religious violence to focus on wars between Western and non-Western countries and religiously motivated terrorist attacks.

Before getting into the subject matter, it helps to offer a perspective on scope as well as terms. This paper focuses on abuse that took place within the United States, and therefore has a particularly American context. It also focuses specifically on victim-survivors who experienced abuse as children, and does not cover the experiences of those who experienced sexual violence by priests as adults. Those other experiences are, of course, valid, but do not fit under the scope of my analysis.

As far as terms go, in this paper I will use the term "victim-survivor" to refer to those who have experienced sexual abuse, whether by priests or not. This is a term that appears in Nanette de Fuentes' chapter "Hear Our Cries: Victim-Survivors of Clergy Sexual Misconduct" of the book *Bless Me Father For I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests*, edited by Thomas G. Plante. De Fuentes gives this reason for using the term:

This is a joint term because these individuals are not simply victims, as though what happened to them stops there. They are also resilient, and however difficult the path to wholeness may be, they become survivors. By using this joint term, their woundedness is acknowledged, and at the same time they are urged on in the healing and recovery process.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York City, Oxford University Press, 2009), 183.

<sup>2</sup> Nanette De Fuentes, "Hear Our Cries: Victim-Survivors of Clergy Sexual Misconduct," in *Bless Me Father for I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests*, ed. Thomas G. Plante (Westport, Praeger, 1999), 136.

In using the term, I agree with de Fuentes' analysis and support the idea that this term best represents the duality of the trauma of their experience and the resilience they develop in order to survive it.

Also, I will use the term “priest abuser” to refer to priests who commit sexual violence. By using this term I wish to call attention to the extremely small amount of priests who abuse children – according to a study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, approximately 4.75% of the priesthood was credibly accused of sexual violence between 1950 and 2002<sup>3</sup>—and to ensure that readers do not begin to associate all priests with this violent and abusive behavior. It is a widespread problem, but should not be generalized to so extreme a degree.

### **Historiography**

The *Boston Globe*'s series of exposés, which spanned from January until December of 2002, opened the door for stories of childhood sex abuse by Catholic priests to emerge in every corner of the country, as well as across the world.<sup>4</sup> Before the *Boston Globe* reporters worked to push the story through, the power of the Church, especially in Boston, was so enormous that priests who were accused might not even fear consequence—Catholic laypeople, including journalists, police officers, attorneys and judges, were taught to protect the Church above all else,<sup>5</sup> and so often contributed to the silence and secrecy surrounding the issue. With this added to the cover-ups within church hierarchy itself, such as bishops and archbishops transferring priests and silencing

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2007), 174.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

victims,<sup>6</sup> abusive priests could be sure that secrecy would protect them. The *Boston Globe* articles destroyed this secrecy, opening up the entire scandal for the public to see.

Within the folds of this silence was a terrifying history of abuse, with specifically religious aspects that would continue to affect many victim-survivors for the rest of their lives. During the grooming process, a process in which child abusers slowly gain the child's trust and manipulate them to prepare them for the abuse, many priest abusers used specifically religious rhetoric, telling children things like Father James H. Hopkins told one of his victims, that "if he [the victim-survivor] told anyone about the oral sex Hopkins engaged him in, God would hate the boy, who would burn in hell along with his family."<sup>7</sup> These words coming from such a highly respected religious figure as a priest would have enormous impact on a victim-survivor, and cause their trauma to be tinged with specifically religious elements.

In addition, child victim-survivors of priest abusers have a particular perspective about religion that affects their experience of the abuse. They often "have difficulty separating the offending clergy from the Church or from God... In the Catholic Church a priest is called 'Father' and is a representative of God. Therefore, to be violated by a priest is to feel violated by God, Christ, and the Church."<sup>8</sup> The church's teachings themselves contribute to this, instructing that priests represent the living Christ,<sup>9</sup> and even that the priest takes God's place or enacts God's will.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the abuse can feel as if it is coming directly from God. Also, if a victim-survivor did report the abuse, a response of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>8</sup> De Fuentes, "Hear Our Cries," 141.

<sup>9</sup> Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas P. Doyle, "The Spiritual Trauma Experienced by Victims of Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy," *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 3 (December 31, 2008), 248.

silencing and denial from bishops or other members of church hierarchy could also contribute to the idea that the church participated in the abuse. Being abused by a representative of Christ, and being subsequently silenced by the Church, can lead to the feelings mentioned above, that God and the Church themselves are the abusers.

As a coping mechanism, many victim-survivors begin to avoid reminders of their abuse by avoiding Catholic churches entirely; this can lead to feelings of isolation from spirituality, and alienation from their spiritual selves and communities.<sup>11</sup> Part of this can be understood, once again, through church teachings, which hold the priest to be a necessary figure through which laypeople receive the sacraments, such as the Eucharist and confessions. Since Catholicism does not emphasize personal spirituality, without a priest, Catholics are essentially cut off from communication with God. Other victim-survivors may avoid the church because they believe that, through the abuse, God has betrayed or rejected them.<sup>12</sup> In this way, many victim-survivors end up separated from their ability to be religious and to feel a sense of protection and strength from God, which further contributes to their trauma.

### **History of the Scandal**

A background of the Catholic sex abuse scandal and its explosion into the public sphere is necessary to understand the different factors that have affected victim-survivors. The first document concerning the abuse of children by priests appears in the year 731 C.E., when an Irish monk known as Bede wrote *The Penitential of Bede*, which suggested that “clerics who sodomize children [should] repent by subsisting on bread and water for

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 252.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 250.

three to twelve years.”<sup>13</sup> This evidence suggests that the issue has persisted over more than just the past decade, in fact stretching back to the eighth century. Sexual abuse is not a modern phenomenon, and this shows that sexual abuse by priests is not either.

The first studied and documented cases of contemporary priest abuse occurred in the 1950s, as revealed by a study done by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 2002.<sup>14</sup> The information collected by this study is tentative, since it relied on bishops' self-reporting of the number of accusations within their dioceses. Also, because of sloppy record keeping and the number of victim-survivors who either never reported, have not yet reported, or were successfully manipulated out of filing reports detailing their abuse, it is impossible to be sure how accurate the study's numbers are.<sup>15</sup> However, it is useful in documenting a general pattern, and for displaying demographic and chronological information about priest abuse over the years since the 1950s.

Although there is little to no information about publicized cases around this time, in 1967 the National Association for Pastoral Renewal sponsored a public discussion about the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, and invited all United States Catholic bishops to attend. Psychotherapist and former priest A.W. Richard Sipe called this discussion the first of its kind.<sup>16</sup> This fact suggests that the issue was becoming more apparent within the church hierarchy, although it remained shrouded in secrecy when it came to the general public. Data on priest abuse in the John Jay study is organized by ordination year rather than by year that the abuse occurred, but it shows that 37% of all

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Ferro, *Sexual Misconduct and the Clergy*. Library in a Book. (New York City, Facts On File, 2005), 107.

<sup>14</sup> Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 174-175.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 174.

<sup>16</sup> Ferro, *Sexual Misconduct and the Clergy*, 109.

priests ordained in the United States in the years 1960-1967 were credibly accused of abuse,<sup>17</sup> a percentage large enough to garner concern.

The first nationally publicized story of priest abuse occurred in 1983, concerning abuse by a Father Gilbert Gauthé in Henry, Louisiana, when “nine-year-old Craig Sagrera told his parents that Gilbert Gauthé had been molesting him. Stunned, the boy’s father approached his fifteen- and twenty-nine-year-old sons with Craig’s story only to learn that the priest had also sexually abused them.”<sup>18</sup> From there, Mr. Sagrera contacted a lawyer, who found out from the local Monsignor that this was Father Gauthé’s sixth assignment after being moved multiple times due to previous sexual abuse allegations. As Mr. Sagrera and his attorney moved further with the case, they were instructed by a monsignor from a neighboring parish to remain silent, telling Mr. Sagrera that he was “a good Catholic high school boy and a good Catholic boy would never sue his church.”<sup>19</sup> Regardless, Mr. Sagrera did move forward with the case, and his attorney eventually filed nine lawsuits on behalf of victims from six families – the diocese’s insurance carriers ended up paying out \$4.2 million to settle these cases.<sup>20</sup>

Though the case of Father Gauthé was publicized, it did not reach nearly as many people as the 2002 case of Father John Geoghan, whose serial abuse was reported by the *Boston Globe* in the first of their series of articles covering the epidemic of priest abuse and its cover-up by the church. The article’s opening sentence does not shy away from the horror of this case: “Since the mid-1990s, more than 130 people have come forward with horrific childhood tales about how former priest John J. Geoghan allegedly fondled

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<sup>17</sup> Frawley O’Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 175.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

or raped them during a three-decade spree through a half-dozen Greater Boston parishes.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the shocking details of the case and the tenacity of the *Boston Globe* reporters in unveiling the church’s cover-up of it, laypeople as well as lawyers, judges, and reporters became determined to understand the pattern of abuse, silencing, and cover-up that had been occurring in the United States for so many years.

After the *Boston Globe* articles were published, efforts began to gather data on the crisis. Both the John Jay study of 2002 and a study conducted by the *Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* in 2004 (also called the 2004 study) were implemented to achieve this goal. As far as pure numbers go, the John Jay study found that 4,392 priests were credibly accused of sexually abusing children between the years 1950 and 2002, and the 2004 study found that that year alone another 411 priests were newly credibly accused. Since no data exists for the year 2003, it can be estimated that a similar number were accused as in 2004, which adds up to an estimated 5,214 Catholic priests who were credibly accused of sexually abusing a child between 1950 and 2004.<sup>22</sup> The John Jay study also reports that the peak of the crisis came in the 1970s, without significant awareness from the public or the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy at large.<sup>23</sup>

Since then, progress has continued toward finding causes and solutions for childhood sex abuse by Catholic priests. One attempt to create a solution was the *Charter*

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Rezendes. "Church Allowed Abuse by Priest for Years," *Boston Globe*, January 6, 2002, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTlrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Frawley-O’Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 174.

<sup>23</sup> Mark E. Chopko, J. Cletus Kiley, and Francis J. Maniscalco, "Journey to the Charter," in *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002-2012*, edited by Thomas G. Plante and Kathleen L. McChesney (Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2011), 33.

*for the Protection of Children and Young People*, also known as the Dallas Charter.

Although many meetings of prominent bishops came before it, the Dallas Charter has been thought of as a “comprehensive response” to the crisis.<sup>24</sup> One of the biggest decisions that came out of the Charter was to adopt a “zero tolerance” approach when it came to priests who have been accused of abuse, meaning that the church would immediately take action to disqualify that priest from clerical service.<sup>25</sup>

Although this seems like a positive move, some have criticized it, suggesting that this approach does nothing to rehabilitate the priest abuser. Removing an abuser from their community can cause a traumatic sense of loss that may encourage the abuser either to kill himself or to reoffend.<sup>26</sup> Instead, it may be more effective for the priest’s bishop to continue to visit and minister to the priest abuser, encouraging healing and recovery. One archbishop who still visits a seminary classmate serving a life sentence for rape stated that “everyone, no matter what the circumstances, is entitled to experience the healing touch of Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> Removing the abuser from an environment with children is of course necessary, but maintaining some connection with his former community can help him to heal and to refrain from reoffending.

### **Survivor Testimony of Abuse**

When discussing such a painful and psychologically harmful event, I believe it is important to include victim-survivors’ own words about what they went through. Instead of talking about victim-survivors in an abstract sense, I would like to give them the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Frawley-O’Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 141.

opportunity to speak for themselves. This allows for non-victim-survivors to feel more empathy for the victim-survivors' situations, and to imagine what it would be like to go through something like that. It also helps to avoid the problem of victim-survivors' stories being ignored, in favor of discussions of the cover-up surrounding the abuse. I will cover the testimony of two victim-survivors, one whose story is printed in a collection of essays surrounding the topic of priest abuse, and another whose memoir details the abuse she suffered at a Catholic orphanage.

The first victim-survivor is Kathleen M. Dwyer, whose story "Surviving is What I Know; Living is What I Am Learning" is published in *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims*, edited by Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea and Virginia Goldner. She discusses her abuse by her father, which led to abuse by priests at her local parish. She says that her abusive father took her into a room in the basement of their church, where a priest and two members of the Knights of Columbus wearing white hoods came into the room. In her words,

Without a word my father took off my clothes and put something like a white slip on me. It was very cold in the room. After that I was placed on the altar, where they removed my slip. They said some words and then put me down on the floor in front of the altar and made me kneel down and bend over, and raped me... I knew I couldn't tell and so I prayed to God to either make me a boy or to at least make me not be.<sup>28</sup>

This harrowing description of Dwyer's abuse is very atypical compared to most victim-survivors' stories, but still valid nonetheless. Most report being much closer to the priest abuser prior to the abuse, as well as going through a grooming process before the abuse

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<sup>28</sup> Kathleen M. Dwyer, "Surviving is What I Know; Living is What I'm Learning," in *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims: The Sexual Abuse Crisis and the Catholic Church*, ed. Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea and Virginia Goldner (Mahwah, Analytic Press, 2007), 107.

occurred;<sup>29</sup> in addition, almost no other stories I read involved multiple priests being present at once. However rare her experience was, Dwyer's story still deserves to be heard.

Years after the priest abuse and the abuse by her father, Dwyer realized that her brain had unconsciously created multiple "alters," or alternate personalities, in order to protect her from the trauma of her abuse. When describing this, she says,

Some of my alters did not know the abuse had ended, and others believed that the abusers had spiritual powers ordained by God that would allow them to reach out from the grave and kill *us* for telling the 'secret.' Most of me felt that we had deserved everything that had happened, that *we* were in fact evil, and that they had only, in God's name, tried to remove such evil. [Italics in original, used to denote the pronouns Dwyer employs to show how she thinks of her alters.]<sup>30</sup>

This feeling of blame and self-responsibility for the abuse is common among victim-survivors, who would rather place the blame on themselves than on the priest who abused them.

At the very end of the chapter describing her abuse, Dwyer talks about her involvement with SNAP, the Survivors' Network for those Abused by Priests, and her process of realizing the impact of what happened to her. She says,

I wish I could close by saying that I am healed and that both secular and religious communities have changed. Unfortunately, neither has happened. Yet, some things have changed. Many of us have moved from victim to survivor to activist, as many have moved from victim blaming to victim believing. It is my hope and challenge that together we will use the past to inform us rather than immobilize us as we work toward creating a safer and more sacred world for those yet to come.<sup>31</sup>

Though she has not forgotten her abuse, she is still going forward with her life, an experience to which many victim-survivors can relate.

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<sup>29</sup> Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Dwyer, "Surviving is What I Know; Living is What I'm Learning," 107.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 108-109.

The second victim-survivor is Kim Richardson, whose memoir *The Unbreakable Child: A Story about Forgiving the Unforgivable* tells the story of the abuse she went through in a Catholic orphanage when she was a child. It also describes the class action suit she joined as an adult with many other victim-survivors from the same orphanage, including one of her sisters. The orphanage was run by an order of nuns, who subjected the children to physical abuse such as beatings and other tortures, but a priest who supervised the nuns was the one who subjected them to sexual violence.<sup>32</sup> Richardson describes the priest in terms of fear, reporting,

I worried that the governing priest, Father Lammers, would be at the horseshoe pit on the playground today. I thought of him as the wolf... He'd wave his big hands, motioning us forward. 'Watch the magic bug disappear.' He'd grin. Father Lammers loved for the little orphan girls to sit on his lap. Luring us with the promise of magic, he'd pretend to make the large black mole – the bug on his hand – disappear. Then he'd touch privates. It hurt.<sup>33</sup>

In the voice of herself as a child, Richardson shows how children often experience priest abuse. She thought of him as a wolf, a creature to be feared, which provides an example of the fear and anxiety many victim-survivors experience during the abuse.

In addition to this broader description, she provides a story of one specific encounter with Father Lammers, in which she was brought into his private quarters by one of the nuns who looked after her. She had an idea of what would happen inside, saying, "I took a bigger gulp of the wine. It burned my throat and caused me to cough. I felt something was evil in this man of God and maybe even myself, but was not quite sure what. You go to hell when you're bad. I took another gulp of the wine. When I looked up, he unzipped his pants. My eyes widened and my heart raced, skipped and felt

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<sup>32</sup> Kim Michele Richardson. *The Unbreakable Child: A Story about Forgiving the Unforgivable* (Clearwater, Künati, 2009), 50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

explosive.”<sup>34</sup> This description highlights the role of the priest, and the impact it has on child victim-survivors. Richardson reports feeling afraid that something was “evil” in the priest, as well as herself, as a possible explanation for the abuse. When a priest abuses a child, what that child has been taught about the priest being a representative of God can have enormous consequences for their mental and spiritual wellbeing.

Interspersed with stories of the abuse that Richardson and the other orphans suffered are descriptions of the court proceedings against the orphanage, and how Richardson as an adult dealt with reminders of her childhood abuse. During questioning by the orphanage’s attorney, he asked her, ““So you no longer attend your parish? Why did you leave?” Impatience crossed my face as I looked to the attorneys. Who wears the face of God? I wanted to scream. Instead I chose my trusted ally, silence. How could I ever explain the irrational thoughts? That to be anywhere near a Catholic Church brought on sweaty palms and crippling anxieties.”<sup>35</sup> Here, Richardson describes her continuing fear of symbols and imagery that could remind her of the abuse she experienced. This shows how abuse can affect someone even years after their ordeal has ended.

In another section describing her experiences as an adult, Richardson describes somewhat of a breakdown she went through during the process of the lawsuit, and the lessons it taught her. She reports thinking,

Who wore the face of GOD? ... *Who?* Who wears the face? “Whoever causes one of those little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.” Anybody listening to the Good Book? Anybody? Who was reading Matthew, Mark and Luke?’ He who had worn the face of God hid behind God’s face to mask his evil deeds. Who wore the face of God?

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 62.

Certainly not the twisted demons who robbed. For only the innocent child could wear the face of God.<sup>36</sup>

In this thought process, Richardson comes to the realization that the priest who abused her was not truly a representative of God—instead, the innocent children were the ones who truly wore the face of God. This is one step on Richardson's healing journey, where she places blame upon the priest for abusing her and removes blame from herself, realizing that she was an innocent child who did nothing to deserve the abuse she suffered.

Through these two accounts, the voices of victim-survivors can be heard. They may not perfectly represent the phenomenon of priest abuse as a whole—for example, most victim-survivors are boys<sup>37</sup>—but they serve to give personal accounts that ground this discussion. Without the stories of individual victim-survivors, the topic can become depersonalized, appearing to be a series of facts and numbers instead of an issue that harms real people. Listening to stories is one way to cultivate empathy for victim-survivors, helping to better understand the issue as a whole.

### **Effects of Abuse on Victim-Survivors**

I will begin with a discussion of the trauma experienced by victim-survivors of childhood sexual abuse in general, and move from there into the specific effects of priest abuse and the experience of religious trauma. This will help to understand the ways in which sexual abuse truly is a form of violence. In a study comparing children who had experienced sexual abuse with children who had not, it was found that children who have been abused “are more symptomatic on many variables, including fear, PTSD [Post-

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 198-199.

<sup>37</sup> Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 3.

Traumatic Stress Disorder], mental illness, cruelty, tantrums, enuresis [bed-wetting], encopresis [involuntary defecation], self-injurious behavior, low self-esteem, and inappropriate sexual behavior.”<sup>38</sup> Studies of adults who survived childhood sexual abuse show that these adults engage in higher rates of risky sexual behavior,<sup>39</sup> and also experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse, and dissociation, than adults who have not.<sup>40</sup> As cold and detached as these lists sound, they represent a lived reality for many people who were subjected to such horrible abuse as children.

Some of the symptoms experienced by victim-survivors of child sexual abuse include dissociation, sudden bursts of anger, feelings of disgust about their own bodies, emotional responses unrelated to the present moment, and self-harm behaviors. Dissociation occurs when a person becomes detached from their current reality and begins to feel as if they have returned to the time of their abuse. For example, a man in his sixties who was abused as a child can no longer be alone with a man without feeling intense fear, as if he is once again about to be molested.<sup>41</sup> Sudden anger can manifest out of a sense that everyone around the person is against them in some way, and they are therefore justified in attacking them.<sup>42</sup> Though these feelings may be confusing to people around these victim-survivors, they relate back to something deep in the victim-survivors’ childhood histories.

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<sup>38</sup> Julia R. Heiman and Amy R. Heard-Davison, "Child Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Relationships: Review and Perspective," in *From Child Sexual Abuse to Adult Sexual Risk: Trauma, Revictimization, and Intervention*, ed. Linda J. Koenig, Lynda S. Doll, Ann O’Leary, and Willo Pequegnat (Washington, DC, American Psychological Association, 2004), 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>41</sup> Frawley-O’Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

Feelings of disgust can come from victim-survivors blaming themselves unfairly for the abuse, as if the priest targeted them specifically because of their body or sexuality, which can lead to feelings of shame related to these things as an adult.<sup>43</sup> Emotional responses often appear irrational or strange to people interacting with the victim-survivor, but in fact they are reacting to certain triggers or flashbacks they are experiencing to their abuse.<sup>44</sup> Self-harm behaviors can be a coping mechanism when emotions run too high: for many who self-harm, it is a way either to punish themselves for abuse they blame on themselves, or to avoid feeling intense emotions related to the abuse.<sup>45</sup> Though it may be a harmful and ultimately ineffective coping mechanism, it is one way that some attempt to deal with what has happened to them.

Although most victim-survivors do not experience all of these reactions, many will experience at least one or two. Through understanding how victim-survivors can react to abuse, it becomes easier to empathize, and to perceive sexual abuse as real and tangible violence.

### **Effects of Priest Abuse: Religious Rhetoric and Symbols**

Victim-survivors of priest abuse also experience many of the aforementioned psychological and emotional trauma responses, but specific to those abused by priests is the response to religious trauma. Abuse by a priest “directly assails the minor’s religious faith and broader spiritual functioning... the individual’s ability to believe in a just and merciful God often is dismantled. Even more assuredly, trust and belief in Catholicism,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 34.

instilled early on in the victim, is shattered.”<sup>46</sup> Since the priest holds a particular position of trust and reverence for the child, abuse by that priest can seriously harm the child’s ability to trust Catholicism from then on.

When religious ideas and vocabulary are used during the abuse, it can take on an even more terrifying quality for the victim-survivor. For example, Father Robert V.

Meffan

Allegedly engaged teenaged girls who were preparing to be nuns in sexual unions with him by describing himself as the second coming of Christ who could help them experience what it would be like to have sex with their future bridegroom. Similarly, victims of Fr. [Father] Larry Brett of Stamford, Connecticut, report that he told them that performing oral sex on him was a special way of receiving Holy Communion from a priest.<sup>47</sup>

By twisting religious symbols in this way, the priest removes a victim-survivor’s ability to experience the religion they were raised in as anything other than a painful reminder of their abuse.

One victim-survivor of childhood priest abuse shares a narrative that corresponds to the point that religious symbols become tainted even years after the abuse ends. He reports that his abuse “taught me that there is a lie in the world... I grew to hate the smells, sounds, feelings of Church – the incense, the collars, the robes. My spirituality and ability to believe in a higher power was destroyed.”<sup>48</sup> The sense that the abuse severely affected a victim-survivor’s ability to interact with the Catholic Church is fairly common; while some experience this as a profound loss of their ability to be spiritual, longing for participation in events like baptism or funerals but not being able to, some

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 36.

simply experience an emptiness related to the idea of religion and the Catholic Church.<sup>49</sup> Either way, the victim-survivor is cut off from identification with the Catholic faith they might have maintained into adulthood if not for the abuse.

### **Effects of Priest Abuse: Church Teachings and Role of the Priest**

Besides feeling cut off from religion, victim-survivors may also experience intense feelings of self-blame and guilt because of Church teachings on the nature of the priesthood. A common understanding of children who grow up in the Catholic Church is that a priest and God are so intertwined as to become the same figure.<sup>50</sup> The Catholic faith requires a complete and unflinching trust in priests as well as God, so when a priest becomes an abuser, victim-survivors may feel that they cannot become angry at the priest for fear that their lack of trust will bring God's wrath down upon them.<sup>51</sup> Priests may even manipulate this belief in the child by suggesting that God will punish them or their families if they tell.<sup>52</sup> The priest is seen as a spiritually perfect figure whose actions are an example the laity should follow,<sup>53</sup> so victim-survivors may believe that they cannot blame the priest, and instead blame themselves.

This self-blame is often encouraged by members of church hierarchy, such as bishops, if a victim-survivor reports their abuse. Though these church officials often defend it as a legal tactic to avoid admittance of guilt, it looks very much like direct manipulation in order to silence the victim-survivor and keep them from launching

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<sup>49</sup> Doyle, "The Spiritual Trauma Experienced by Victims of Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy," 251.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 250.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 250.

<sup>52</sup> Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 189.

accusations against the church or its priest. Some bishops, archbishops or monsignors went so far as to suggest that the victim-survivor “may have invited or even initiated these kinds [of acts],”<sup>54</sup> and still others insinuated that “anyone past the age of reason (seven years old according to the Church) knows right from wrong.”<sup>55</sup> This attempt to silence can cause intense feelings of shame and guilt in the victim-survivor, causing them new forms of trauma.

Related to the topic of self-blame are the Church’s teachings on suffering and forgiveness, which are often used in this same form of silencing a victim-survivor. Through the narrative of Jesus Christ’s death, the Church valorizes suffering, paying special deference to those who have suffered, believing that suffering occurs for a greater good.<sup>56</sup> This focus on the good that comes from suffering can lead to an emphasis on forgiveness of those who wrong us, rather than on making sure these wrong-doers are held accountable for their actions. This kind of rhetoric seems to be “instructing victims and their families to forgive molesting priests, rather than expressing outrage about the sexual abuse of minors by priests,”<sup>57</sup> a silencing tactic which uses religious rhetoric as its foundation.

However, this rhetoric was not only used as a form of silencing: it was also used when the issue of priest abuse was discussed between priests. For example, one priest reports that “he had heard a few other priests suggest that survivors of sexual abuse had been given the opportunity to share the cross with Jesus and should graciously shoulder their burdens. In this scenario, survivors ‘should’ accept their suffering as an opportunity

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 43.

for enhanced identification with Jesus instead of demanding earthly restitution at the expense of the Church.”<sup>58</sup> This idea appears to focus on the pain of victim-survivors’ experiences, but then passes it off as a potential religious experience instead of hoping or praying that the victim-survivor’s pain will heal.

The concept of forgiveness can also be important for other figures, such as the priest abuser himself and Church hierarchy member who hears reports of the abuse. Since the Catholic Church teaches that everyone sins, and that one’s sins can be absolved through Jesus Christ, the priest abuser can be led to believe that they do not need to take responsibility for the abuse.<sup>59</sup> It can also relate to anyone who has received a report about a child being abused by a priest, because “the Church cannot bear to hear about child sexual abuse, so the quicker a child forgives, the easier it is for the listener.”<sup>60</sup> In this way, the bishop, archbishop or monsignor is able to refrain from dealing with the fact that the abuse occurred, and instead focus on forgiveness so that they can move on.

This focus on forgiveness also occurs when laity or other priests attempt to excuse an abusive priest’s behavior. One parishioner said of a priest accused of abuse, “He was a good pastor. We all commit sins, and we all hope God will forgive us.”<sup>61</sup> This same excusing of a priest-abuser’s actions can also occur by bishops who transfer priests instead of removing them from ministry, insisting that they need to be forgiven rather than punished.<sup>62</sup> Once again, this rhetoric of forgiveness is used to replace ideas of the priest abuser being accountable for his actions, and of justice for the victim-survivor.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>59</sup> Doyle, “The Spiritual Trauma Experienced by Victims of Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy,” 246.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 246.

<sup>61</sup> Frawley-O’Dea, *Perversion of Power*, 187.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 185.

When a victim-survivor experiences rejection, silencing or admonition from someone to whom they have reported their abuse, it can lead to a further sense that they have actually been abused by the Church itself. “When a Catholic child or adult is sexually assaulted or raped by a cleric, he or she usually views the cleric himself as the one who inflicted the harm. When bishops or other officials either fail to respond in a compassionate manner and appear to support the offender at the expense of the victim, it is the *Church* that is inflicting the harm.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, the abuse becomes much bigger than the harm caused by the priest abuser himself – it extends to the entire Church community, meaning that the victim-survivor associates pain not only with priests, but with the entirety of the Catholic Church.

Though the effects of trauma on victim-survivors of childhood priest abuse are great, this does not mean that there is no capacity for healing with time, as well as self-work through therapy or other forms of psychological help. Just as some of the trauma deals with religious elements, so must the healing process. Important aspects of healing from the religious violence perpetrated through abuse include realizing the institutional Church’s responsibility for not protecting the victim-survivor from abuse, and forming an authentic and personal spirituality. In holding the Church accountable for the silencing, the cover-up and the neglect to remove abusive priests from ministry, the victim-survivor may release some of the self-blame they hold, instead realizing that the abuse was not their fault.<sup>64</sup> In addition, forming a sense of spirituality can create a relationship to some Higher Power “that is not a source of pain, fear and guilt but rather enhances life and provides joy and balance. This non-toxic spirituality requires a healthy sense of self-

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<sup>63</sup> Doyle, “The Spiritual Trauma Experienced by Victims of Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy,” 244.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 256.

worth if it is to take root and grow.”<sup>65</sup> For this reason, the formation of a renewed sense of spirituality is often the last step in the healing process.

### **Conclusion**

For the reasons discussed above, childhood sexual abuse by Catholic priests has a particularly religious element that means it must be considered not only to be sexual and psychological or emotional violence, but also religious violence. The effects of this violence on survivors contain religious facets that make them uniquely different from the experiences of victim-survivors of abuse by non-priests.

Although priest abuse has been widely acknowledged and heavily studied in the years since 2002, it still has not been acknowledged as religious violence, nor has it been compared and contrasted with religiously motivated terrorist attacks, which are much more likely to be called religious violence. Once the point has been brought up, it seems strange that priest abuse would *not* be among the most common phenomena labeled religious violence. This helps to point out the ways in which people coming from a Western context tend to be more likely to label something outside of the West as religious violence, as opposed to something within it. Strongly aligned with this point is Cavanaugh’s argument mentioned at the beginning of this paper: Western thinkers use the category of religious violence to condemn non-Western violence as fanatical, while justifying Western violence as logical and necessary.<sup>66</sup> If the category were to be divorced from this battle between West and East, it would be easier to see that priest

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 257.

<sup>66</sup> Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, 183.

abuse deserves the title of religious violence perhaps even more than religiously motivated terrorist attacks do.

I argue in addition that categorizing priest abuse as religious violence would validate victim-survivors' feelings of spiritual trauma, and call attention to the specific differences that exist between abuse by priests and non-priests. Naming the abuse as religious violence might assist in the healing process by helping victim-survivors to recognize the religious elements of their trauma, putting them further ahead on their journey of healing that trauma.

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