

In Spite of the Hierarchy: Understanding Clergy Sexual Abuse

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The Dark Night of the Catholic Church

Brendan Geary and Joanne Marie Greer (Editors)

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THIS BOOK IS ONE OF THE VERY few written about the clergy abuse issue that provides scholarly articles about the key aspects of this complex and highly controversial subject. One of its more valuable aspects is the objectivity of the contributions. This objectivity is remarkable because, out of 25 chapters, including an introduction and conclusions, by 18 authors, nine of the authors are clerics or members of Catholic religious communities. All contributors are professionals with impressive credentials and experience. *The Dark Night of the Catholic Church* is not presented as an apology for the institutional church's efforts to confront the pandemic of abuse worldwide, nor is it a polemic against the responses of the Vatican and the bishops. It succeeds fairly well at its aim to be a source of information about clergy abuse.

The book is made up of 25 chapters divided into four parts: "Understanding," "Listening," "Responding" and "Edu-

cating and Preventing." The first section attempts to present answers to basic questions about why clerics molest children, the effects on the victims and, most importantly, the contribution of the institutional church and secular society to the sexual abuse phenomenon.

The dimension of the abuse scandal that has captured the greatest share of attention and emotion has been the question of causality—

not "why do clerics sexually abuse minors?" but "why did the church allow it to happen?" This latter question is directed not at the wider church, but at the leadership, namely the popes throughout the

ages and the bishops. The first chapter provides a concise historical overview of the church's official responses beginning with the *Didache* of the first century and culminating with a very brief summary of the 20th century. The chapter concludes with the thoughtful statement that, with few exceptions, "the church does not understand the damage that abuse does to children." Other chapters in this section explore how society in general and the Catholic hierarchical system in particular have contributed to child abuse. The chapter on the contributions of the hierarchy is especially well

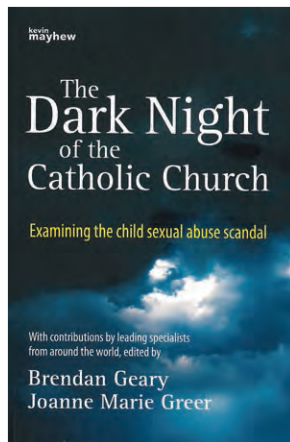
done. It dives into the clerical culture and provides examples of arrogant clericalism on the part of complicit hierarchs. The section on what is best termed "lay clericalism" dovetails well with the preceding chapter on societal endorsement of abusive behavior towards children. One of the primary causes underlying the widespread abuse has been the reprehensible tendency of secular society and many Catholic laity to react with either denial or minimization.

The chapter titled "Religious and Educational Cognitive Distortions Used by Clerical Child Sex Abusers" is a fascinating contribution and one that is long overdue. The author provides lucid explanations as to why abusers often appear to justify their behavior, sometimes using theological concepts. This section goes into some of the cognitive distortions and toxic belief statements of those who oversaw clerics. The chapter proves the necessity of further study of the cognitive distortions of the hierarchy since these are, in many ways, more important to the thorny task of arriving at credible answers for the bishops' behavior.

Although the behavior of the hierarchy has somewhat overshadowed that of the predators, there is also a pressing need to examine the internal makeup of the clerics who abuse. This subject is explored in two chapters that do an excellent job of summarizing a vast amount of literature on the subject.

The only weak chapter of the section is chapter 8, which deals with the abuse of faith, or the effect of clerical child sex abuse on victims' faith. The author did an admirable job in presenting the basic issue and the initial symptoms or manifestations of a damaged belief system. The fault lies not with the writer of this chapter but with the fact that very little research and writing has been done on the spiritual trauma following the sexual violation of a child-believer by a cleric.

At the center of the collection are five chapters that make up Part 2, "Listening." Here we find the three most powerful contributions to the book: chapters by Colm O'Gorman, Marie



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Collins and Bishop Geoff Robinson. O’Gorman and Collins are articulate and wise survivors from Ireland whose courageous efforts in the campaign for recognition and justice for themselves and all survivors have been foundational in shaping the remarkable course the abuse scandal has taken not only in Ireland but throughout the world. Bishop Geoff Robinson of Sydney, Australia, is one of three bishops known to have stood up publicly in support of abuse victims and in criticism of the Vatican’s inept response. He begins his contribution by saying “What follows is my personal story.” His personal story, however, is far more than an autobiographical sketch of his connection with the victims. It is an incredibly courageous witness to the painful truth that

well as religious brothers and priests. Lay people are not only shocked and hurt by incidences of abuse, but the existence of an abuser close to home has a painful impact on their overall faith in the church. This chapter also helps dispel two erroneous notions: first, that every priest and religious not directly involved must have been aware of the incident and helped cover it up. The second misconception is that the majority of those not directly involved with the crisis are both supportive of the disastrously inadequate responses of the bishops and defensive about priest and religious perpetrators.

The third section, “Responding,” departs from the standard descriptions of treatment modalities or complaints about the hierarchy. The first chapter addresses immediate interventions with

reported to civil authorities. This is hard to swallow in light of the blatant statements of several curial cardinals insisting that bishops should not report accused priests. The chapter on canon law is about what should be done, not what has been done. The latter is a subject that merits its own study.

The final section is about “Educating and Preventing.” This is the most theoretical area in that it speaks about the “charism of celibate chastity” and “teaching human sexuality in a ministerial formation course.” Both are eloquent phrases, but in light of the consistent failure of mandatory celibacy over the past 20 years they betray an obvious disconnect with reality. The chapter on policies and procedures (Chapter 23) is an exposition of the environment in which

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must be found in the equally painful search for the cause of the nightmare that has plagued the People of God. The pope and Vatican officials, as well as every bishop, must look within the church for the antecedents of the abuse, rather than doing what the Vatican continues to do—seek reasons outside the church upon which to place blame.

The second section contains a valuable contribution by an anonymous priest-abuser. There are few such written accounts. This one is autobiographical but not an “apologia” intended to defend his actions. The writer shares his journey after exposure and provides needed perspective into the life of an abuser who benefited from both therapy and incarceration. His story puts a human face on at least some clergy abusers, moving them from the category of inhuman monsters to deeply flawed offenders who are capable of some degree of redemption.

The final chapter is titled “The Voices of Secondary Victims.” It offers insight into the reactions of active laypersons as

child victims, always a vital step in the healing process. Two chapters describe psychological treatment and spiritual healing of abusers, while the final segment is a description of the role of canon law in dealing with abuse.

This last chapter serves as a straightforward description of the available procedures and not an in-depth critique of the failure of the church’s legal system. The fact that the author chose not to take his analysis to this level is illustrated by certain assertions based on the text of the law isolated from practice. One is that the best interests of the child are of prime consideration in canon law. This is true only on paper, since history has amply demonstrated that the opposite is true of the way canon law is usually applied. The other glaring inconsistency between canon law as written and as applied by the hierarchy is the matter of reporting offenders to civil authorities. The author of this chapter naïvely claims that the Holy See’s practice and position is clearly that allegations must be

policies are created rather than an attempt to present the various policies as the answer to the problem. The author offers some very realistic observations about the challenges involved in putting effective programs into place. It is an excellent chapter which might have been better with a summary of the problems encountered with the application of various policies, noteworthy among them the lack of support from bishops.

The Dark Night of the Catholic Church is a very valuable book. One hopes it will prove to be a catalyst to more intensive, extensive and fearless research into this complex issue. Thus far the official church on the Vatican and local levels has avoided serious, objective research into the many dimensions of clergy abuse. This book proves that scholars affiliated with the church have the capability and sensitivity to advance into unknown areas. The lesson from a quarter century of experience is that research will take place in spite of and not because of the hierarchy. ■