Can Catholics Survive the Clergy Abuse Crisis? Some Psychological and Theological Reflections

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In response to the report released by the Grand Jury of Pennsylvania and ongoing information being disclosed regarding clergy sexual abuse, Bishop Patrick McGrath, of the Diocese of San José, California offered four diocese-wide listening sessions in the Fall of 2018. According to the bishop, the focus of these sessions was “to seek input from people in the pews on the pathway to reform, to listen to those who have been victimized by clerical sexual abuse either directly or in their families, and to pray for God’s grace to be our only guide.” I was asked to moderate the sessions and to provide a summary report to the diocese on the concerns voiced by those present. That summary document is in the purview of the diocese and is beyond the scope of this article, but I would like to say that its uniqueness lies in that it documents a significant sample of the non-clerical voice of the church community—not the voice of professionals on panels or journalists but truly the voice of “people in the pews.” Overall, the sessions were attended by about 400 people.
This article represents some of my own personal thoughts after being present at these sessions and reflecting on the material discussed.

I want to be clear regarding my own position and point of view. I am a life-long White, American, Catholic woman, with advanced degrees in both Clinical Psychology (Ph.D.) and Theology (M.Div. and M.A.). I was educated for twelve years in Catholic schools, am married, and have raised three children who have also been educated for twelve years in Catholic schools. I have been a practicing Clinical Psychologist for over twenty-five years, and have worked as the Director of a Pastoral Care Department at a Catholic Hospital and also as an adjunct professor and clinical psychologist in a counseling center at a Catholic university for over fifteen years. Throughout my professional career I have also had a private practice, am a trained trauma specialist, and have been active in the training and supervision of psychologists. I have spent my entire career working at the intersection of psychology and religion, both on theoretical and practical levels, and I would like to highlight a few issues that emerged for me out of the diocesan listening sessions.

The Trauma of Victims and Their Families

What came across so clearly in the listening sessions was the anguish of victims and their families—the pain, the grief, the rage at being preyed upon, seduced, used, and betrayed; the shame and despair that has been endured and which has stunted, damaged, and destroyed lives, personal development, relationships, healthy sexuality, careers,
vocations, and mental health, as well as faith and hope. This pain has also been visited upon generations as families have struggled with shame, secrets, divided loyalties, crises of faith, and family dysfunction. Families have suffered from painful, discouraging and often futile advocacy for themselves, and also incurred the high costs of legal and mental health services. The church’s urging victims to come forward and paying for their mental health services is an important but paltry first step in their healing process. Dioceses, parishes, and other Catholic institutions need to provide opportunities where members of the church community can be educated about trauma and its physiological, psychological, and behavioral manifestations. People need to know what is helpful and unhelpful in responding to trauma victims, their families, and support systems.

The church community should not, under any circumstances, blame victims. Education is needed about the psychological and institutional reasons why victims are hesitant to come forward, the shameful history of how those who came forward were doubted and dismissed, and how the institutional church hid information for decades, interfering with proper justice for victims and allowing future innocent victims to be preyed upon. It is essential that victims should never be blamed for “destroying’ the church.” For centuries the institutional church planted and watered the seeds of its own destruction in this crisis. There is a well-documented multiplicity of factors contributing to this crisis including poor selection, training, and monitoring of clergy; a clerical culture of secrecy, power and privilege; unaccountable institutional leadership; negative attitudes toward women, and more. Education and ongoing dialogue regarding the complexities of issues noted above are foundational in grounding any approach to healing for victims and others impacted by this crisis.
The Secondary Stress and Traumatization of the Laity

Healing and justice for those abused should be at the forefront of our thinking and actions. In pondering concerns raised in the diocesan listening sessions, another critical issue that stood out is the secondary traumatization of the laity. I want to acknowledge that those clergy and members of the hierarchy who were not involved in either predatory behavior or cover-ups are also experiencing signs of stress and trauma. To address this would lie beyond the scope of this article but I encourage all efforts towards helping them to explore and define their particular experiences and needs in the church’s healing process.

In psychology, secondary traumatization refers to the negative psychological impact of indirect exposure to disturbing and recurrent news accounts, editorials, traumatic images, and stories of others’ suffering, and the additional shock of feeling used and betrayed. In my personal and professional experiences, I continue to hear over and over again how people keep bracing themselves for more negative information to come out; how they have reacted to lists of credible abusers being released—the shock of seeing, in print, the names of people whom they admired and trusted. Laity are also confused and concerned about the people they experienced as abusers who are not on the lists. Crucial feedback given by the laity during the listening sessions included their particular feelings of shock, betrayal, and anger at how a number of high-ranking clergy in the institutional church let credible abusers be moved around to different parishes or communities, putting people and their families at risk for further abusive behaviors, unable to defend themselves. Recent critiques of the Pennsylvania grand jury report
notwithstanding (see Peter Steinfels, “The PA Grand-Jury Report: Not What It Seems,” Commonweal, January 14, 2019), reading it evokes deep emotional response and even shock: the identification and grooming of vulnerable victims, the threats and payouts to keep them silent, the utterly destructive manipulation and confusion of religious faith with human trust, and unhealthy and irresponsible sexuality.

The continued exposure to information about clerical sexual abuse has also been a source of ongoing triggers for laity who have suffered sexual assaults and abuse in other contexts. Many are being re-traumatized by hearing about repeated stories of abuse, cover-ups, victim-blaming, and violations of trust by people and institutions holding authority. In my parish, professional, and social circles I hear stories of how painful it is to have ongoing discussions with others about the depth and breadth of this crisis. People report how hard it is for them to hear ongoing challenges from those who voice disgust at the Catholic Church’s behavior and incredulity at how one could remain a member of that corrupt institution. These challenges are particularly difficult when they come from one’s own children and family members.

A serious secondary traumatization is also manifest in a lack of trust in the moral authority of the Catholic Church, given that the institutional church has known for over thirty years about clergy sexually abusing vulnerable victims and has continued to cover up the depth and extent of this problem, perpetuating more victimization of innocents, depriving communities of the ability to protect themselves, and allowing perpetrators to escape criminal prosecution. The laity’s shock and distress at the ongoing exposure to these events and the huge breach of trust they represent has been underestimated and unaddressed.
We are at a crisis point. Editorials, commissions, pronouncements, listening sessions, Masses, calls for prayer and reconciliation, and days of healing are important first steps, but they are not enough. We must consciously counter attempts to quickly move through this crisis. We must resist attempts at quick closure, pat answers, minimization, and simplistic calls to “move on.” Such moves toward efficient solutions have more to do with ego, personal and institutional shame and control than with a disciplined and caring search for truth. Currently the laity and many clergy are in a state of shock. People need time and encouragement to talk truthfully about the impact and implications of this crisis on them.

*Forgiveness and Healing Are Processes and Not Events*

Reflecting on the feedback from Bishop McGrath’s listening sessions, another key issue that struck me is the insight from both psychology and theology that forgiveness and healing are processes and not events. If there is a significant rupture in a relationship (breaking of promises, vows, trust, and commitments), healing and forgiveness involve *active but different processes* for both those injured and those responsible for the injury. As noted above, victims and others affected by this crisis need to have significant time and opportunity to understand, process, speak about, and heal from their trauma. The laity should not be asked or expected to participate in processes of forgiveness and reconciliation unless the clergy actively and sincerely engage in the truth telling, repentance, and behavioral change that are fundamental to the abuser’s processes of healing and forgiveness.
Full Transparency

The beginning of this process for the abuser and those allowing abuse to happen is full transparency and acknowledgement of the entire truth. We must know what happened.

We must be able to question freely without shame, guilt or fear. We have a right to know the depth and breadth of this scandalous behavior—not only in the US but world-wide.

So far, the focus has mainly been on priests abusing male children, but we are aware this may only be the tip of the iceberg. There is reason for concern that older boys, teens, young adult males, and seminarians have been abused in addition to female children, teens, and young adults as well as adult women and women religious. The Pennsylvania report estimated that the accurate number of children who failed to come forward, whose records were lost or never permanently recorded, is in the thousands. Extrapolated to other states and countries, this scandal is horrendous, and as noted in one of the listening sessions, there is serious concern that no one is paying attention to those victims in isolated and remote areas without tools of information, legal action, and resources for healing at their disposal. Recently, Pope Francis acknowledged that women religious in several countries have been abused by priests and bishops. The ongoing disclosure of the depth of this problem has also brought to the surface serious concern that the institutional church has not and does not take seriously reports of mistreatment and harassment (sexual and emotional) of women working in Catholic institutions with clerical and male oversight and leadership. Nor does the institutional church take seriously that its construction of human sexuality, placing mandatory celibacy at the center of its ministerial life, is also in a state of crisis. A this point in time, to not consider the
necessity or advisability of maintaining clerical celibacy seems like an extreme form of denial.

*Taking Responsibility for the Damage That Has Been Done*

Another step in the church’s healing and forgiveness process is that those who have broken trust must take full responsibility for the damage done. Owning this sin also involves accepting the consequences of criminal prosecution. The institutional church must confess openly and with conviction that that these actions were and are indefensible and deeply based in sins of pride, greed, lust, and abuse of power and privilege. Those clergy not actively engaged in cover-ups must also assume responsibility for collusion, through their silence, by not bringing attention to known damaging behaviors of peers and by not voicing truth or taking action due to fears of confronting authority and/or of losing their own privileged positions.

Bishops are particularly culpable here. While priests may have been the most numerous perpetrators, extensive cover-ups would not have been possible without the collusion of bishops and other hierarchy. The Pennsylvania report clearly delineates how, by the end of the twentieth century, dioceses had clear, consistent, coverup strategies for hiding child sexual abuse. Bishops must assume responsibility for how they, and those under their supervision, forgot about, misplaced, hid, discouraged, and discounted the testimony of many victims who came forward. There is clear evidence of how review boards were not given all the relevant records secretly maintained by bishops in church archives. A clear point raised in the Bishop McGrath’s listening sessions was how the institutional church must openly acknowledge and repent for how it has used lawyers,
law enforcement, insurance companies and treatment centers to be complicit in

dismissing, manipulating, or covering up information and interfering with justice for

victims and criminal prosecution for abusers. In responsibly discussing news and grand

jury reports, it is important to make such distinctions as differences among dioceses,

leadership, and time periods (e.g. pre- and post- Dallas Charter); however, these
distinctions cannot be used in the service of minimizing the depth and implications of this
crisis, quieting voices or hiding essential truth that has to be named and owned.

Making Reparations

A further step in the forgiveness and healing process for abusers and those who allowed

abuse to happen is that those who break trust must take steps to make reparations.

Dioceses are taking some steps in this regard by reaching out to victims, facilitating their

connecting with necessary services, and paying for victims’ therapy. A reparation we

must insist on is that our church hierarchy fully support and cooperate with federal and

state investigations of abuse. They must also openly and actively support legal measures
to abolish statutes of limitations in prosecuting these abuse crimes. These are the most

obvious and foundational first steps.

The following are some of the deeper questions that haunt me about how to make

needed reparations: How are clergy going to make reparations to families who invited

them into their homes, cooked dinner for them, and washed the altar linens they used at

Mass while abusing their children, damaging their lives, and driving some to suicide?

How do you make amends for the trauma, despair, questioning of faith and broken trust
the laity are being put through? How do you make amends to the laity for their hard-
earned money going to pay for clerical sins and coverups? How do you make reparations
for promoting theology reinforced by church doctrine and practice that allows women to
be seen as temptresses, less than, and subordinate to men, when male clerics have raped
children in places of worship, in schools, in diocesan-owned vehicles, and groomed
children in diocesan programs and retreats while male members of the hierarchy colluded
in keeping victims silent and crimes hidden? I do not know the answers to these questions
but they are ones we must keep asking.

_Changing Attitudes and Behaviors That Created and Sustained Abuse_

Another critical step in the forgiveness process for abusers and their protectors is to
change the ongoing circumstances and behaviors that contributed to the abuse. This
change must be honest, behavioral change that can be monitored by those whose trust has
been broken. It will necessitate a fundamental change in the clerical culture of the church
and the structure of the institution itself. A concern that was continually voiced by the
laity during the diocesan listening sessions was that people who represent 1% of the
church cannot continue to hold 100% of its power and privilege. We cannot tolerate
institutional practices that hide information and block transparency, and we must
transform attitudes and behaviors that keep laity in subordinate, dependent positions
reminiscent of parent and child relationships. As the renowned theologian Dorothee
Soelle pointed out in her book, _The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance_ (Minneapolis:
Fortress, 2001), holy power is shared power, it is not power over.
Many current articles call for the laity’s having active involvement in diocesan review boards and oversight of budgetary and policy-making decisions on the parish and diocesan level. Henry Shea wrote an excellent article (“Curb the Crisis: 10 Essential Lessons, National Catholic Reporter, vol. 55, no. 8 [2019]) delineating the standards we should have for conducting any future investigation of the church’s leadership hierarchy if it is to be credible and ethical. What struck me in reading his article was how the Spirit is using the writer’s gifts to chart a way forward through some aspect of this crisis. I wonder what it would be like if the laity were truly called upon to use their gifts, skills, and experience to soothe and heal the trauma in parishes and to work on needed standards and structures for equality, justice, transparency, and accountability. This would require a significant amount of true conversion, repentance, and humility on the part of the clerical community.

The Effects of the Exclusion of Women

The Catholic Church’s exclusion of women from full participation and leadership has contributed to the sexual abuse crisis. At the most fundamental level, silencing women’s voices and limiting their power has closed the church to 50% of experienced reality (intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual) on which to conduct theological reflection and establish church tradition and policy. Given their historical position of being made subordinate to men and subject to male emotional, physical, and sexual harassment and abuse, women have a different view of power, relationships, and sexuality. They also have a deep, visceral, and emotional identification with the need to protect the vulnerable
and victimized. These are qualities that are sorely needed at this point of crisis in the church.

Women need to be seen as equal to men and treated this way. They, too, have been baptized into the priesthood of Christ. We are at a unique place in history where there are substantial numbers of highly educated women theologians and pastoral ministers eager to serve in a ministerial capacity. By virtue of their baptism, ordained priesthood is their right. Not giving women full access to all ecclesial roles and institutional power is like telling a bar-certified lawyer she can never become a law firm partner, litigator, or judge, nor can she hold public office because she does not have the correct genitals, and then defending this policy by briefs and case law written by a secret society of male lawyers steeped in a patriarchal culture and power structure that maintain this privilege by excluding women.

*The Need to be on Firm Ground of Historical Facts and Scientific Evidence*

To move forward with integrity in the processes of healing, forgiveness, and transformation of behavior, the church community as a whole needs to acknowledge the importance of honoring facts, scientific evidence, and naming difficult existing realities within the church. There *is* historical evidence that the church has allowed married priests. There *is* historical evidence that women held leadership positions in the early church. There *is not* scientific evidence for a connection between homosexuality and pedophilia, pederasty, or predatory behavior. Homosexuality *is not* “deviant behavior.” It is not a mental disorder. People who engage in sexual abuse and predatory behaviors usually are struggling with abusive personal histories, deep needs for power and control,
deficits in the necessary emotional and social skills to develop and maintain relationships with appropriately aged peers, as well as mental health disorders of alcoholism, antisocial personalities, impulse control disorders, etc. There is no scientific evidence that gay priests cannot be celibate any less than heterosexual priests. In terms of naming difficult existing realities, the institutional church and laity both must openly acknowledge the truth about the significant homosexual presence in the clergy. Many of us know very spiritual, pastoral, and dedicated priests who are gay and feel very threatened to claim their true identity. Unless we honestly face and deal with this reality, the institutional church will continue to stifle their giftedness and to perpetuate demeaning and hypocritical attitudes and policies regarding gays and others with non heterosexual identities.

Recognizing and Dealing with Shame

In facing this crisis, we must stay rooted in humility and compassion. Even good, well-meaning people can do very hurtful and harmful things. The awareness of one’s own culpability for engaging in, or the fear that one might be implicated in despicable behavior causes deep shame. Scientific evidence has shown that shame is one of the least tolerable feelings for humans (G. Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-based Syndromes* [New York: Springer, 1989]). People can and do violate their own moral codes to avoid shame and its intense pain. People can also defend against feeling shame by disconnecting from the experience (e.g. not talking about it or shutting down others talking about it), closing ranks, making excuses, minimizing the behavior, and projecting the problem onto others, to name a few defensive behaviors we
all can probably recognize. To promote true healing, our clergy and hierarchy will have to learn how to manage shame properly and use this experience to grow in humility and trust in God. There is a great choice to be made: Will the clergy and hierarchy continue to rely on their own egos, power, and clerical privilege to avoid shame and true reform or will they choose to root their future motivation and behavior in the way of Christ?

To Stay or to Go

A final issue raised by the diocesan listening sessions was how to grapple with the difficult question of leaving or remaining a member of the institutional church. I have regular conversations with very thoughtful, spiritual, and socially conscious people asking themselves the critical question of whether or not they can, in conscience, stay within or support the institutional church. There is also grave concern about the future of the US Catholic Church given the huge attrition rates among young people in particular. I have heard countless young people use this church scandal to further bolster their decision to leave a church that they perceive as stuck in Medieval theology and worldviews, irrelevant to their needs, and unaccountable. In general, decision-making on this issue must be informed by prayer, seeking guidance from the Spirit, personal conscience, and discernment with trusted others. I do feel strongly that victims should never be asked to have ongoing exposure to predators or triggering situations in which they must endure continued suffering.

When should one consider leaving? Spiritual leader and author, Rev. Flora Slossom Wuellner gives some guidance in her book (Release: Healing from Wounds of Family, Church and Community [Nashville: Upper Room, 1969]). Talking about Jesus’s
Sermon on the Mount, she notes that his words give us a powerful discernment point by which to recognize a situation that is destructive to our spirits: “If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be filled with darkness” (Matthew 6: 22–23). She goes on to note (p. 75) that the biblical meaning of eye is that part of us which brings light and “if we have entered into any activity, any relationship, intending to receive and give healthy light (love, joy, strength, wholeness), and have discovered that the very source of intended light has become a source of darkness to us: “how great is that darkness!” (v.23). A critical discernment question is going to be whether or not our communal structure and atmosphere has become so toxic that our inner light cannot remain light. Can this church promote and incarnate the vitality of an all-inclusive caring community rooted in the divine and manifested in justice and joy?

The counsel of St. Ambrose might also be helpful in our discernment process as well. He warned that “fortitude must not trust itself.” (See Josef Pieper, The Four
Cardinal Virtues [Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, 1966], p. 122). Fortitude must be informed by prudence. The courage to endure all things, to keep going when the going gets rough is necessary, but not sufficient. The brave person seeking the good must first know what the good is. A long obedience in the same direction is not necessarily a virtue and will not get us to where Christ is leading us.

If people choose to stay within the church, we cannot stay as we were. We must become a people of God in protest. We must try to follow that biblical advice of being “wise as serpents but innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). Psychology has shown us that most people do not easily give up power. Nor do they change unless meaningful negative
consequences fall upon them. The information our church has revealed and its response so far has been due to political, legal and monetary pressures. We cannot operate under the delusion that there has been a true conversion or change of heart. We receive most of our ongoing information regarding clergy abuse from reports regarding investigations, legal summaries, or articles by reporters or academicians. What we should work toward is the institutional church’s actively owning these sins and seeking to heal the wounds caused by them. Parishes could establish ongoing discussion and healing groups; sermons could seriously grapple with the theological and moral questions at stake in this crisis; parishes and dioceses could facilitate having laity preside over reconciliation services for clergy; they could also facilitate having panels with clergy speaking openly about how they perceive that the institutional church created this crisis and how they personally have both internalized and exercised power and privilege.

Also, the laity has to understand and change its complicity with the parent/child relationship that has been set up in the institutional church. They must give loving but firm feedback about homilies lacking in theological depth or real-world relevance, about clergy whose language skills and cultural understanding are sub-par, about priests with no pastoral abilities, about clerical power plays that go on in parish councils and committee meetings, etc. The laity has tools at their disposal: Our money, our presence (or absence), our voices, our solidarity, and our prayer. We must use these instruments of peaceful power to show that we will no longer tolerate a theology and church structure blind to equality, justice, history, patriarchy, scientific truth, and civil liberties.
As a clinician and a woman trained in theology, I feel one of the great psychological and spiritual challenges we face is how to hold in creative tension the energies of healing, humility, accountability, restorative justice, forgiveness, and hope. In *The Silent Cry*, Dorothee Soelle also speaks of “remaining in inconsolability” (p. 154). She is referring both to solidarity with Christ’s deep suffering and a human being’s reflection on the phenomenal strength and courage it takes to carry on in the face of a power that is unbroken, unrepentant, and could care less. Her words raise the challenge of how we can keep this inconsolability steadfast in the love and plan of God. A challenge for the laity will be not shying away from our feelings of despair and hopelessness. For the clergy and church hierarchy, the challenge will be not shying away from the pain and shame of seeing how far they have caused the church to stray from the way of life, leadership, and community envisioned by Jesus.

Only by acknowledging that our deepest pain has no easy human solution will we ever be inspired to turn to God and seek solace and redemption. Perhaps a good question to wrestle with this Lent is how we can share in God’s great agony regarding human choice and God’s great desire for human healing, so that we can somehow facilitate the Spirit’s ongoing movement towards resurrection.