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Celibacy and sexual abuse: is there a link?

MARCO MARZANO

Università degli studi di Bergamo, Italia

Email: marco.marzano@unibg.it

Citation: Marzano, M. (2025). *Celibacy and sexual abuse: is there a link?*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», Vol. 15, n. 29: 137-146. doi: 10.36253/cambio-15995

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract. This paper examines a highly controversial issue: the structural relationship between sexual abuse by the Catholic clergy and the clerical celibacy rule. The first part of the paper reviews the literature on the relationship between clerical celibacy and sexual abuse and examines the various arguments. The second part of the paper is based on the results of a number of empirical social studies and focuses on precisely identifying certain dysfunctions resulting from mandatory clerical celibacy that ultimately affect clerical sexual behaviour, namely: 1) loneliness; 2) sexual immaturity; 3) emotional detachment (an inability to nurture authentic feeling and to put oneself in others' shoes) 4) an excessively legalistic mindset (more interested in abstract norms than in human beings); and 5) permanent coexistence with secrecy and lies.

Keywords: celibacy, clerical abuse, catholic church, catholic priests.

A CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC

The existence of a direct and statistically relevant causal nexus between the Catholic Church's mandatory celibacy rule and the abuse committed by its priests (a nexus which the Catholic Church has never agreed to examine in depth) is certainly very difficult to demonstrate. The best way of testing the existence of this link is, in all likelihood, an in-depth comparison between organisational contexts in which Catholic priests marry (in the Eastern Rite Church) and others in which they are celibate (the Latin Rite Church). The problem is that research of this sort has never been done.

That said, it should be acknowledged, as Scheper-Hughes and Devine (2003) have done, that the Catholic Church hierarchy has begun clamping down more severely on priests guilty of abuse in recent years whilst never agreeing to open up debate around the structural characteristics of the institution (including mandatory celibacy) potentially linked to abuse and preferring to refer to the Adam's fall, Eve's seduction, universal human frailty, modernity, secular values, American culture, or a sensationalist media, as the occasion demands. A supplementary factor added of late by

Pope Francis is clericalism. The stances of Catholic intellectuals such as Gary Wills (2000), who see a direct correlation between the two issues, are thus currently in a clear minority and powerfully isolated within the Church.

Once again Scheper-Hughes and Devine (2003) have noted that the more conservative Catholics believe that the solution to the problem is a matter of conscience, inviting people not to commit sins and keep away from temptation while the more moderate limit themselves to calling for certain modest organisational changes such as psychologists in the seminaries or improvements in the priest selection process. Recently the issue of abuse has prompted the German synod to examine certain key issues in priests' lives with a view to reform, including mandatory celibacy.

The reasons behind the unwillingness of a great many in the Catholic hierarchy to discuss celibacy are, for Scheper-Hughes and Devine (2003: 20), very clear and consist of the fact that

the mantle and aura of prestige that has been accorded to Catholic priests allowed them to be treated for generations as special agents of God, as mediators between ordinary humans and the divine. Celibacy endowed Catholic priests with awesome, almost magical, power and authority. Celibate priests were not "ordinary men". It is this aura, this "mystical halo", that the pedophile priests have taken advantage of to gain easy access to naive religious families and their vulnerable children. And it is just this powerful aura that the American bishops want to protect. Hence the cover-ups, the secrecy, and the stonewalling of prosecutors. Hence also the Vatican's resistance to all well-reasoned proposals for eliminating mandatory celibacy for Roman Catholic clergy; for opening up the priesthood to women and married clergy; to an open discussion of an identified subterranean gay subculture of premier American Catholic seminaries; and, consideration of what might be a more positive and healthy alternative to this.

Scheper-Hughes and Devine's is an approach which was also taken up in the report of the French CIASE commission (French Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church 2021: 232) which reads:

The historical link between celibacy, continence and power is certainly a key to understanding the proliferation of sexual abuse by clerics and members of religious orders. There is a risk that celibacy may contribute to the overvaluation of the person of a priest. As Sister Véronique Margron (2018: 96) points out, "it is the representation of the priest that is in question. We have to be careful about the way in which a priest is considered a man apart belonging to the category of the sacred". This can reinforce a self-image of an almost "superhuman" nature, whose ideal reaches so high that if it one day cracks, the whole personality comes crumbling down. The person may build up a self-image that is out of sync with reality and when it collapses, some cannot cope.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCIENTIFIC DEBATE

Many authors in the scientific debate view mandatory celibacy as just one of many causes of the abuse committed by members of the clergy (see Ballano 2019 for an ample review): we have already looked at that of Scheper-Hughes and Devine (2003), to which we can add that of Doyle, Sipe and Wall (2016) who have suggested that celibacy prompts a heightened desire for physical intimacy and affection in clergy which can lead to abuse. Others have stressed that celibacy seriously hinders seminarians' sexual development (Death 2014), while Terry and Ackerman (2008) have affirmed that celibacy does not seem to discourage abuse of children. Famous psychologist and former priest Richard Sipe (1990) has also identified mandatory celibacy as one of the main causes of clerical abuse and argued that at least 6% of American priests have had sexual relations with children. For priest and therapist Kenneth Adams (2011) celibacy is a psychological block for priests which prevents many from bringing out and examining psychological problems which have remained unresolved since their ordination. Rausch (1992) has similarly highlighted the adverse effects of celibacy on priests' lives. The writers of the 2005 Irish Ferns Report (Murphy, Buckley and Joyce, 2005) were also convinced of the importance of celibacy in clerical sexual abuse, whilst highlighting the positive nature of the innovations recently brought in within seminarian training institutions. Other scholars have underlined the striking historical continuity of the phenomenon of clerical abuse in the Catholic Church (Doyle, Sipe and Wall 2016).

There are obviously also authors who have categorically denied the existence of a link between mandatory celibacy and clerical abuse. An example is the American priest and psychologist Stephen Rossetti (2002) who has

argued that the psychological problems which prompt priests to commit child sexual abuse often pre-date their joining the seminaries. A further well known Catholic priest and scholar, Andrew Greeley (2004), agrees with him. Lastly, the famous American John Jay Report (John Jay College of Criminal Justice 2004) did not number celibacy among the causes of abuse. Those writing the report argued that abuse was especially a 1960s and 70s issue due largely to causes external to church life.

A more in-depth examination of the nexus between mandatory celibacy and clerical violence against children is, however, to be found in the extremely detailed report written by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017).

The authors of the Australian report argued, as I did at the start of this paper, that a direct causal link between mandatory celibacy and clerical abuse has not been demonstrated. That said, the report affirms that the celibacy rule is a powerful risk factor where clerical abuse is concerned.

The authors of the report arrived at this conclusion after opportunely illustrating different points of view on the subject. One of the experts the commission listened to, Dr Whelan (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017), argued that the relationship between celibacy and abuse is more accidental than essential, asserting that married people also commit sexual abuse and celibates can be emotionally mature and capable of loving in a balanced way. For Dr Whelan, discovering the cause of abuse above all requires enquiring into individual psico-social profiles, identifying a psychopathology, an arrested development, inner conflict or emotional immaturity. Celibacy is a negative element, he argues, only because, for many, it is too lofty an ideal which is impossible to live up to and this can act as ideal terrain for the development of compensatory and defensive behaviours including child abuse.

Other experts (Parkinson and Cashmore) heard by the Royal Commission, on the other hand, argued that clerical celibacy is a powerful risk factor for sexual abuse and that the Catholic milieu is the most dangerous in Australia where child sexual safety is concerned. Parkinson and Cashmore (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017) argued that the number of paedophiles in the priesthood is, strictly speaking, not especially high and abuse is frequently to be explained by straightforward opportunity. In Catholic seminaries, priests' loneliness and the unsatisfactory nature of their sex lives – both direct consequences of celibacy – potentially meld with the opportunities offered by a context made up of young men far away from their families. For Dr Geraghty (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Volume 16, Book 2: 744), mandatory celibacy, «had come at a very high price, in the form of loneliness, depression, personality disorders, alcoholism, guilt, secret affairs, double lives and sexual proximity, a “social mess” which has remained hidden until recently».

The Canadian Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy (Archdiocese of St. John's 1990) came to the same conclusions, while other scholars have noted that there are many mature, balanced Catholic deacons and only 0.3% are abusers. Australian churchman and bishop Geoffrey Robinson (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017) shares this opinion and has invited the Church to make clerical celibacy voluntary.

The writers of the Australian report concluded their lengthy examination of the issue with this affirmation:

It is apparent that celibacy in itself is not a direct cause of child sexual abuse. However, we are satisfied that the Catholic Church's rule of compulsory celibacy is a contributing factor for the incidence of child sexual abuse, especially when combined with other risk factors (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Volume 16, Book 2: 766).

One of its recommendations (16.18, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Volume 16, Book 2: 770)) at the end of the report reads: «The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference should request the Holy See to consider introducing voluntary celibacy for diocesan clergy».

METHODS

I believe that the conclusions of the Royal Commission on the link between celibacy and sexual abuse should be taken seriously. What I would like to do in the remainder of this article is to analyse some of what I consider to be the main risk factors for sexual abuse arising from celibacy. The results of a long ethnographic study on clerical sexuality in Italy enabled me to identify these factors (Marzano 2021). In the course of this fieldwork, conducted between 2017 and 2020, I carried out in-depth interviews with forty-one Italian priests and former priests who shared their own experiences of love and affection, from early youth to maturity, from their lives in the seminaries to their lives in the parishes. The research did not focus on clerical abuse, but it brought to light many problems related to the sexual and emotional lives of celibate priests. As we will see, in some cases these problems significantly facilitate sexual abuse and could therefore be considered risk factors. Marie Keenan's (2012) remarkable research on abuser priests in Ireland, together with other scholarly work, allowed me to supplement and refine the definition of risk factors associated with celibacy.

THE INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS BOUND UP WITH CELIBACY AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO CLERICAL ABUSE

Let us begin by noting that mandatory celibacy influences and orientates the whole seminary training process and the impact of this on the sexual and emotional lives of aspiring priests is huge.

As is well known, within the framework of current Catholic norms all extra-marital sexual activities, from masturbation to group sex, are entirely forbidden. It is equally well known that priests and aspiring priests are subject to mandatory celibacy and as they cannot marry they are bound to total chastity. The same is true for unmarried laypeople (and within married life everything not bound up with procreation) but the organisational and ideological apparatus mobilised to defend the chastity of the clergy is very different, as are the consequences of infringing sexual purity norms. Young, unmarried Catholic laypeople are not exposed to the powerful surveillance apparatus at work in the seminaries (and only in these) to control the sexuality of aspiring priests.

Nowadays young Catholic laypeople in many parts of the world not only flout the premarital chastity rule but even talk openly about this to their peers, and sometimes even their priests, without this resulting in stigma, exclusion from a group or punishment by priests (Marzano 2012). In the case of young seminarians the situation is very different: their lives are constantly monitored and regulated by the institution throughout the day with almost no free time, above all outside the seminary, being allowed. Furthermore, seminarians are bombarded with ideology promoting celibacy and the sword of Damocles of instant expulsion hangs over them for any transgression whatsoever.

Any sort of sexual experience is thus no simple matter for seminarians, and requires a certain skill in dodging institutional controls. Openness is out of the question, as this would result in immediate expulsion from the status of aspirant priest (Marzano 2021).

Sexuality and chastity are dealt with at the seminaries, moreover, in an unfailingly and exclusively theological and rational way, i.e. they are bookish and doctrinaire subjects which are never examined in the context of individuals' real lives and chastity is always presented as a supreme ideal to aspire to, a goal which all aspiring priests must make every effort to achieve. Any divergence from this ideal, at least by those who have just set out on seminary life and obviously struggle to remain celibate even simply in thought and masturbation terms, leads to practically permanent feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Marzano 2021). Sexual and emotional lives, desires, feelings and passions are thus complete taboos and frequently buried deep in the consciences of individual seminarians. They cannot be spoken of even amongst colleagues if not in the form of banter and frequently vulgar jokes and allusions. Any serious reference to the theme is extremely risky: a companion confided in may snitch or spy on their fellow seminarians and get them in trouble. It is only amongst seminarians who are "together" in a relationship that reciprocal bonds of loyalty ensure complicity. The only context in which seminarians' sexual and emotional lives are accorded space is in confession with their spiritual fathers, a figure of authority who frequently lacks the skills and

background required to foster a serene human and emotional growth into adulthood of the young men whose welfare has been entrusted him (Keenan 2012).

Overall, in very general terms, the primary dysfunctions in the lives of priests caused by mandatory celibacy are: loneliness, sexual immaturity; emotional detachment; a legalistic mindset; permanent coexistence with secrets and lies; and abuse as a secondary adjustment. All these elements play an important part in the drama of sexual abuse by the clergy.

Loneliness

Loneliness is one of the most tangible features of priests' lives. When they enter seminaries aspiring priests at least partially leave behind all their pre-existing social bonds, frequently without really acquiring new ones (Keenan 2012). Within such institutions friendships between peers are a source of very real danger, first and foremost of which is trusting the wrong people, confiding (frequently their innermost secrets) with those who subsequently turn out to betray such trust (Marzano 2021). Even those outside the seminaries can only rarely become true friends for seminarians (Keenan 2012). Given the way priests' social images are constructed, opening up to laypeople and confessing their suffering to them almost always involves priests giving up their status, bringing them down to the plane of ordinary mortals with the same emotional and interpersonal problems as everyone else.

Even after ordination, in their parish lives, priests frequently experience significant and profound existential loneliness which can culminate in a range of negative feelings and harmful behaviours (alcoholism and various forms of addiction: Celenza 2004; Ballano 2019). Lastly, loneliness has been acknowledged in multiple quarters, including within the ecclesiastical world, as one of the main causes of clerical unhappiness and frustration, one of the reasons behind priests' decisions to leave the priesthood, marry and have children. Celenza (2004) and Ballano (2019) have, in fact, argued that loneliness is a specific sexual abuse risk factor, as the existence of a family network would constitute an important controlling element in priests' lives and reduce the opportunities for abuse as well as being a valuable social integration and attachment element.

Sexual immaturity

The sex lives of aspiring priests are entirely hidden, suffused with secrecy and frequently, at least in their first years in the seminaries, replete with feelings of guilt, remorse and failure to live up to the ideal clerical model they are constantly exposed to in the seminaries, as well as fear of discovery and condemnation (Marzano 2021). Seminarians' first amorous experiences are frequently late and unsatisfactory and their knowledge of sexuality is equally generally approximate and incomplete (Scheper-Hughes and Divine 2003). The result is a marked sexual immaturity in comparison with their male lay peers, a serious delay in the development of a healthy and natural relationship with sexual desire and their bodies and a systematic association between sexual pleasure, failure and sin (Keenan 2012). In other words, in this respect priests remain at length at an infantile and immature stage of development dominated by (frequently obsessive) masturbation and a mountain of fantasies and illusions which are as attractive and seductive as they are repellent and frightening.

This immaturity is not simply sexual and emotional but encompasses priests' whole personalities. The fact is that future priests in the seminaries, all of whom are at least 20 years of age, are systematically infantilised and treated as children totally incapable of independent action. Their lives are controlled down to the tiniest detail by the institution and all contact with the outside world and within the seminaries is subject to constant, ultra-rigid control (Marzano 2021). The manifest purposes and explicit goals of this disciplinary regime reflect, on one hand, what is seen by the organisation as a primary need to carefully monitor the authenticity and depth of seminarians' vocation with great severity and, on the other, a desire to develop in seminarians feelings of unconditional dependence and total subordination to the institution, a willingness to obey unquestioningly seen as indispensable to church functionaries. Seminarians' submissiveness is constantly tested in their training process and consti-

tutes one of its main objectives. The latent functions of this are multiple and consist, on one hand, in fostering in seminarians an unusual ability to eliminate or limit any external or public behaviours not conforming to institutional expectations and thus to lie about and hide their real feelings. This is a cat and mouse game with its predator and prey. The more the organisation attempts to unmask the disobedient the more God's future functionaries devise tricks and stratagems designed to make them seem docile in public and, at the same time, nurture a freedom expressed only in the shadows of a double life. On the other hand, seminarians get used to considering only that which comes from above – from their superiors, from the church hierarchy – as to be feared whilst the needs and interests of those below them in the hierarchy, and thus, first and foremost, their congregations, their flocks, as irrelevant, with the latter consistently seen as people to be handled firmly and expertly and not as individuals to be treated with responsibility and respect (Keenan 2012). Both of these characteristics play a key part in fostering abuse, including in less predictable ways, which is thus not simply a result of the obvious fact that many priests are at a stage of sexual maturity which resembles that of their victims (Keenan 2012). For example, as Kelly (1998) has highlighted, the strict discipline referred to above generates profound repressed anger which sometimes translates not only into depression and sadness but also into a desire for omnipotence as regards the children they abuse.

Sexual immaturity is one of the problems most frequently cited in the scientific literature on the clergy and clerical sexual abuse. An example is the work of Eugene Kennedy, author of an important psychological study on the clergy in the 1970s (Kennedy 1972). Kennedy argued that only very few priests reach full psycho-sexual maturity. Immaturity was also cited as central to clergy's lives by psychologist Merlin interviewed a few decades ago by Scheper-Hughes and Divine (2003: 28):

The vows of poverty and obedience – he said – infantilize the adult male, making him dependent on a series of father figures at a time when they should be in control of their own lives and responsible for the lives of children and young people. Celibacy takes away from the adult a primary vehicle for the expression of intimate social relations. The end result is “chronic infantilization”. Based on his extensive clinical experience, Merlin was convinced that celibacy was a strong co-factor in sexual abuse in the Catholic clerical community.

Sexual immaturity was also cited as a key element by the authors of the Australian Royal Commission report. Many of the experts heard by the commission highlighted the nexus between immaturity and sexual abuse. The evidence provided by Thomas P. Doyle, which stressed the association between seminary training, celibacy and sexual immaturity, was especially important. In his opinion,

the grounding for celibacy, the training, the nurturing and the formation for celibacy has prevented men from maturing sexually, emotionally, psychologically in many ways, so that, as one priest psychologist said, what we have out there is the best-educated group of 14-year-olds in the country (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Volume 16, Book 2: 791).

Father Doyle also added that priests «have a very stultified comprehension of human sexuality, and that plays in when they are unable to comprehend the damage that the sexual violation of a boy or girl does to an individual» (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Volume 16, Book 2: 756).

It is precisely in the seminaries, Doyle argued, that

we find males who are entering puberty, isolated in an all-male environment with an institutionalized negativity (or even hostility) towards marriage, sexual contacts, intimate relationships and women. The idea was that men could be best prepared to accept and live a celibate life if they were cut off from all contact or even discussion of the sexual dimension of humanity. The seminarians were young boys whose meaningful emotional and sexual development was paused at a most crucial age (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Volume 16, Book 2: 757).

Emotional detachment

Young aspiring priests are taught more or less implicitly that the main source of danger to the strength of their vocational trajectories lies in an inability to manage their emotions, a failure to control their desires and impuls-

es. Uncontrollable emotions are thus, for seminarians, the most terrible of the monsters to be kept at bay for a peaceful life. The problem is that this constant exaltation of rationality over emotions frequently comes to the fore in non-orthodox expression of repressed emotional and sexual needs, as well as a systematic inability to accept all forms of emotional life and a total absence of empathy, a structural inability to put themselves in other people's shoes and imagine what these latter might feel as a result of their actions (Keenan 2012). This clerical personality trait is expressed openly as priests seeming always in a good mood, open to others, unfailingly aloof from aggressivity, anger, resentment and other uncontrolled feelings.

In the case of abuse, this “taught emotional detachment” takes the form of an inability to empathise with victims: abusive priests are frequently incapable even of understanding the scale of the harm they have done and think that their abuse will not have especially negative consequences for the girls and boys they have abused (Keenan 2012).

An excessively legalistic mindset

A constant emphasis on the importance of obeying the rules to the letter, combined with a difficulty in accepting and dealing with their feelings risks generating, in many priests, a quasi-obsessive and exclusive focus on obeying Church law at the expense of all else (Keenan 2012). From this perspective, child abuse risks being seen by abusers more as an expression of sin (committing impure acts) than as a crime against real people which causes suffering.

In reporting the opinions of a great many experts, including many priests, the report of the Royal Commission highlighted the risk that abusing a child is seen by many priests as a less serious sin than a relationship with an adult woman, as it does not constitute a violation of the celibacy vow. This interpretation accords with the opinion of scholar and Good Samaritan sister, Elisabeth Delaney, that sexual abuse against children is still put in the canon law category Delicts against Special Obligations rather than the Offences against Human Life and Liberty category¹. This also confirms the limited propensity of bishops to report crimes committed by those below them in the hierarchy:

We are satisfied – the Royal Commission concluded – that it is likely that the way child sexual abuse-related offences are framed in canon law contributed to the view held by many Catholic Church leaders that child sexual abuse is a moral failing or a breach of the obligation of clergy and religious to observe celibacy, rather than a crime to be reported to the police (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Volume 16, Book 2: 697).

Permanent co-existence with secrecy and lies

Priests pass their whole lives, from their training onwards, steeped in a “culture of secrecy” within which all the important things in their private lives – the emotional and interpersonal spheres – can in no circumstances be revealed to the public. Sincerity is absolutely not an option for priests. Double lives, in the sense of private lives entirely hidden from public view, is the rule, the norm. Concealment is an unavoidable necessity if they are to continue as priests without surrendering their emotional needs (Kennedy 2001).

Once again, this aspect was forcefully underlined by the Royal Commission's report, which stressed the way in which the culture of secrecy generated by celibacy «led to similar secrecy and a tendency to look the other way in relation to child sexual abuse». «Defenders of celibacy – the Report reads – do not accept that mandatory celibacy may have devastating consequences for many clerical men who remain within the priesthood or religious life by living a double life, living in a clerical sexual underworld and developing an almost dual existence».

The negative consequences of a climate of hypocrisy and secrecy within the Church were stressed by practically all the experts heard by the Royal Commission.

¹ In 2021, Pope Francis included sexual abuse of minors by clergy in the section of the Code of Canon Law on Offenses against Human Life, Dignity, and Freedom. (https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib6-cann1364-1399_en.html#OFFENCES_AGAINST_HUMAN_LIFE,_DIGNITY_AND_FREEDOM)

Sexual abuse as secondary adjustment to celibacy

The exceptional results obtained by Marie Keenan in her interviews with nine abuser priests show, I believe, that abuse can unfortunately constitute a by no means negligible form of secondary adjustment (Goffman 1961) to the emotional life imposed by celibacy for a portion of the Catholic clergy (although I feel duty bound to note that an overwhelming majority of priests do not abuse children). Let us begin by saying that next to none of the abusers interviewed by Keenan (and this assessment is also to be found in the North American JJR) show the psychiatric pathology traits associated with paedophilia or an anti-social syndrome (APA, 2013). Abusing priests are thus not, in the vast majority of cases, “paedophiles”, i.e. clinically ill individuals irresistibly attracted exclusively to sex with children, but rather “abusers”, i.e. frequently depressed people made ill by loneliness and sexually immature rather than aggressive or perverse who, at a certain point in their lives and frequently simultaneously with other relationships, sexually abuse children, simply exploiting the opportunities their frequent contact with children give them. Furthermore, none of these seem to have chosen the priesthood in order to abuse, i.e. for the opportunities it offers for violence against children. Quite the opposite. The choice of the priesthood is often motivated by an obsessive fear of sex (Keenan 2012). Many abusers speak of having seen sexual attention on children as a sort of “payback” for an overly full life spent entirely at the service of the institution. Sexual contact with children is thus, for some of them, an “innocent little game”: little because it frequently did not lead to full-blown sex and thus might appear to abusers as a sort of game, a lesser crime against Catholic morality. The limited importance accorded such acts is triggered by the fact that the overly legalistic mindset and taught emotional detachment referred to above leads to many abusers not realising the suffering they have caused the children concerned, except after lengthy therapy (Keenan 2012). At the moment of the abuse, moreover, the absence of explicit rebellion by children is interpreted by many abusers as a demonstration of consent (and appreciation) by victims. In quite a few cases abusers were in the past themselves victims of abuse (sometimes in seminaries) but were not able, at least until their therapy was complete, of recognising the psychological damage caused them by this abuse. In such cases, then, abusers would not be able to see the damage caused to their victims because they could not see their own (Keenan 2012).

A great deal of research, lastly, has highlighted that such priests often side with the ultra-conformist, hyper-orthodox and church loyalists factions and often have a great deal of anger as a consequence of their overly submissive attitudes. This does not mean that their sexual behaviour, their abuse, is contradictory. And it does not do so because, as the studies done in this field have once again confirmed, many of these priests made serious attempts to obey their celibacy vows. Sex with children, above all when it is occasional, not penetrative and followed by recourse to confession (which confirms its denial) is viewed as compromising their vows of celibacy to a lesser extent. A stable relationship with an adult and perfectly consensual partner might, in the eyes of many abusers, constitute a much greater risk. Children’s relationship with priests is a subservient one in which children are subjected to priests’ authority and there is thus a greater likelihood that they will keep what happened secret and do nothing to bring it out into the open or threaten to tell bishops, as adult partners do.

From this peculiar point of view abuse can be considered, as Keenan (2012) did, a form of unsuccessful adjustment involving an attempt to build an efficient self capable of balancing individual autonomy and institutional demands (Goffman 1961) but we could also add that the failure of this form of adjustment is revealed in full only when abuse is reported, when the crime is made public and scandal follows.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to show that the rule of compulsory celibacy, even if it is not in itself the cause of sexual abuse, is an important risk factor in sexual abuse of minors. For a minority of priests, unfortunately, this risk translates into sexual abuse, with all the appalling consequences this brings with it. Of course, the perils arising from celibacy-centred training can all be greatly reduced, even almost completely eliminated, by the measures taken to counteract it by seminarians and priests during and after their training. This can take a variety of forms:

for some, maturation involves an active sexual and emotional life, for others it means consciously- and freely-chosen celibacy. In all cases, and for all priests, the compulsory celibacy rule is an obstacle to sexual and emotional maturity and increases the risk of loneliness and all the other negative syndromes I have described in this paper.

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