

Some Thoughts on the John Jay Study: *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010*

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The John Jay Study—*The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010*—was released last week. The importance of our continuing review and study of this issue was underscored by a recent *60 Minutes* interview of Archbishop Dolan of the Archdiocese of New York.

During the interview, Morley Safer asked a question that is on many people's mind: "Is the scandal and sin of sexual abuse by priests ever going to go away?" To which Archbishop Dolan quickly replied, "I don't want it to go away too soon." I applaud Archbishop Dolan's recognition that this is not something we can "get over." I recently met with a victim of sexual abuse and though the abuse happened decades ago, for this individual the pain was as great today as ever.

There has been too much pain on the part of victim survivors of sexual abuse, too much loss of trust at so many levels of the Church, and there remains a pressing need for us to continue to respond to victims as well as to diligently enforce a safe environment for present and future generations of children and youth. Even though we know that abuse occurs in all segments of society, the betrayal of trust when priests abused children and in those instances when the Church failed to respond appropriately places our sexual abuse crisis in a category of its own.

The need to keep this topic in front of us is a good reason to recommend that all Catholics take the time to read and ponder this report of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The report was commissioned and partially funded by the Bishops of the United States and is a companion to the "nature and scope" report that was released in 2004. The John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York was chosen to conduct this research because of its reputation and independence from the Bishops' Conference.

This report, which deals with the deeper question of "causes and contexts," is long, and even the executive summary is not short, but the full report is likely to provide more insight than you will receive from headlines or sound bites on television or radio.

The report reminds us that because of the horrendous nature of the sexual abuse of a child by a priest or trusted adult, the view of previous decades that victim survivors and offenders should be quickly addressed and then urged to move on was wrong. The focus was too often on the priest-abuser and how to manage him rather than on the harm done to the victim.

The research indicates that most incidences occurred from mid 1960s to the mid 1980s, and even recent reports fall into that time period. This is consistent with our local reality though we also have received a number of reports from the 1950s and early 1960s. In addressing how abuse was able to continue, the report provides detailed statistics and research findings that address both the cultural atmosphere of this era as well as some particular findings about how the Church and other institutions in society operated.

An important finding is that no one cause can be determined. There has been much speculation about celibacy, but researchers stated that since celibacy has been a part of the discipline of the Church since the 11th century, it cannot account for the historical phenomenon of abuse cases spiking during these two decades. In addition, researchers pointed to the fact that most sex offenders in the broader community are not priests or religious, and most are married or in a relationship with an adult.

The report supported the emphasis of the Church since the passage of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* on zero tolerance of sexual abuse among priests or Church employees, reporting sexual abuse to authorities, transparency, promoting safe environments, and strengthening formation in seminaries. Though recognizing the progress that has been made, researchers emphasize that these efforts must remain essential best practices and become routine responses.

The report noted that over the last 25 years, seminaries have made substantial changes in their efforts at human formation and provided a “remarkable intensification” in helping seminarians understand how to live a life of healthy celibate chastity. As this formation component has improved, abuse reports have gone down dramatically.

Stressing the need for ongoing prevention, outreach, and accountability, researchers remind us that organizational systemic change takes decades, and we cannot afford to become complacent about the need to improve. Thus I pledge my firm commitment to our sexual abuse policies and to any improvement that may be needed. Following the lead of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, our policies place emphasis on outreach to victims, and the position of Victim Assistance Coordinator is ably held by Dr. Tom Robbins. The Sexual Abuse Review Board, composed primarily of lay experts who are not employees of the Church, also has been invaluable, and I am grateful for their wisdom and counsel.

Creating safe environments is another best practice described in this research, and our policies require that all employees and volunteers who work with children receive training on the nature, dynamics, and prevention of childhood sexual abuse. Thus far 25,436 adults have been trained. These training sessions are enhanced by “safety barriers” in the form of codes of conduct, age-appropriate education for children, background checks, and a comprehensive database that tracks background checks and attendance at training sessions. We have stressed with employees and volunteers the obligation to report any suspicion of abuse to the authorities, and we have established positive and productive relationships with law enforcement as we cooperate with investigations that involve priests or Church employees. I am grateful to our priests, religious, and lay pastoral leaders who have worked so diligently to create and nurture a safe environment for our children and youth.

As we receive this report, please keep our priests in your prayers. As we all know, the vast majority of priests serve faithfully and unselfishly and lead lives of heroic holiness. We see their generosity in their pastoral care and leadership that reaches far and wide each and every day and in their dedicated preaching and celebration of the sacraments.

The report noted that no other institution has allowed itself to be studied this thoroughly on the question of sexual abuse. Despite its painful nature, I welcome this research, especially if it will help to reduce the instances of sexual abuse in our Church and society.

There is much more information in the full document, and I encourage your study and feedback. Please go to <http://www.usccb.org/mr/causes-and-context.shtml> for the full report and other background information.