

REFLECTIONS OF A RECOVERING PRIEST

INTRODUCTION This article is a very personal document. I am speaking from my own experience. I am not an expert who distills scientific conclusions from the study of groups of sex offender/clergy. I am a priest and a sex offender. This article derives from what I have learned through reflection on my life. I do not claim that my assertions would necessarily be held by other sex offender/clergy. I speak from the perspective of 12+ years of recovery and I speak out of a great love for the Church.

I have organized this material around six headings that provide me the opportunity to tell you some of my story and offer thoughts and reflections on what I consider to be critical areas which you must consider in dealing with priests who are sex offenders. I hope that these reflections on my life story will be of some assistance to you in addressing the issue of sexual abuse by priests.

WHO AM I? I am the youngest of four children in my family. I suspect that my family was not particularly different from any other. I had a very highly idealized image of my family, thinking that in a way we were just like Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and the boys. It is only subsequently, after a great deal of counseling and reflection, that I have been able to identify the dysfunctions that existed in my family, namely in the areas of communication, the identification and expression of feelings, and in particular around some very secretive attitudes toward sexuality. I would suggest that my family background is not extraordinary. Rather, it fits the profile of moderately, and perhaps typically, dysfunctional family.

I entered the seminary at age 14. In many ways the seminary picked up where my family left off. The subject of sexuality remained largely unaddressed. When I was about 20 years old I realized that I was attracted to young adolescent males. Up to this time I had been able to characterize my attraction as some form of latent homosexuality. By age 20 it was clear that I kept getting older but the persons I found attractive remained 12-15 year old males. I was afraid to mention the nature of my sexual attraction to anyone in authority at the seminary because I feared that it would result in my not being ordained. There was no mechanism in place that would have invited me to reveal my personal struggle. I denied the fact of my desire for boys to reduce the internal dissonance I felt. I wanted very badly to be a priest. I also was very ashamed and frightened by my sexual orientation.

I was ordained in the mid 1970's and received an assignment to a suburban parish. Shortly after I arrived in the parish the pastor was incapacitated by a heart attack. It was during my five years in that parish that most of my acting-out behavior took place. I had engaged in some sexual misconduct prior to ordination, but it was of a less severe variety and very sporadic.

When I was in the parish, my sexual behavior ranged from inappropriate touch up to and including oral sex with one of my victims. My victims were boys, typically between the ages of twelve and fifteen. In the majority of cases, my behavior was masked by the pretense of wrestling.

During these wrestling matches, I would arrange to either rub my genital area against the boys, or be able to in some seemingly casual fashion, brush against their genital area. At that time I didn't believe that the boys would be aware that there was a sexual overtone to the wrestling. I suspect now, that in any number of cases they were aware to some degree or another that there was something wrong about the touch, even if they could not identify it as sexual. After my story became public, I presume that they were far more able to identify occasions on which sexualized touching took place. In the case of one of my boy victims, this inappropriate touch escalated to more conscious and overt sexual behavior. It was with this boy that I engaged in oral sex.

After my behavior became known to my diocese's officials, my bishop, who had known me for over ten years as a seminarian and as a priest, called me in for a private conference. He asked me the question, "Who are you?" It's an apt question, because my profile as a sex offender would be difficult to identify easily. I had a sort of "Golden Boy" image. When I was getting ready to leave my first assignment I was asked of my interest to be trained as a hospital chaplain or to teach at a local college, as well as at the local seminary. A chancery official asked if I would give any consideration to pursuing a canon law degree. People were unlikely to suspect that I was engaged in sexual misconduct because I seemed so very well put together. My highly developed professional skills blinded people to my acting-out behaviors and acted as a sort of cover.

I have been able to identify a number of elements that contributed to my sexual acting-out. The first of these was overwork. After my pastor had his heart attack, I began working extremely long days, usually starting at 8:00 in the morning and concluding about 10 or 11:00 at night. This compulsive drive to work was very destructive to me, and led to a great depletion of my energies. The depletion made me vulnerable to replacing those energies in inappropriate ways. My typical inappropriate way was acting-out sexually with adolescent males.

A second factor was my inability to identify and "feel" my feelings. I experienced feelings and emotions by associating with people who are involved in highly-charged emotional moments, such as birth, death, weddings, etc. When I was with people in very intense situations I felt emotions, but that is not the same as having one's own feelings. My own emotions were hidden from me. It wasn't until I entered therapy that I was able to identify and experience feelings such as anger, fear, loneliness, and anxiety.

A third element that led to my acting out was poor intimacy skills. I had many friends, but I never felt capable of revealing to them my struggle with my sexual attraction. I never felt that I would be accepted if I shared this aspect of my life. My congregation became my circle of friends and my source of intimacy. Although I thought of many parishioners as friends I always remained their parish priest which was the core of our relationship. As a result I was never sure when I was "on duty" and when I was socializing. There was an intrinsic inequality to these relationships which militated against true intimacy. As social events with parishioners piled up my social life developed into a whirlwind, a further source of depletion. Much of this activity took place in family settings that gave me access to boys. I turned my congregation into my whole world, and in the process let go of people who were my peers, old friends, college friends, etc., who would have been more

appropriate candidates for intimate friendship.

These elements led me to cross my boundaries, my natural sense of appropriateness. I never wanted to hurt any of those boys. But I was depleted; I overworked; my feelings were not adequately expressed and were running rampant within me; I distanced myself from friends to whom I might have expressed these feelings or dealt with the depletion; my intimacy skills were limited. I could not maintain my boundaries and sought something that would make me feel whole. I sought to have my depletion filled up via the sexual activity with the boys.

I would like to be clear that my sexual orientation toward children pre-dated my ordination and is a deep-seated psychological reality of my life. But it was the elements listed above which threw that orientation into high gear and weakened the boundaries that might have kept it from being acted out.

INTERVENTION My diocese became aware of my behavior when my primary victim wrote a letter that was addressed to me but was intercepted by his parents who shared it with the diocese. This letter detailed some of the abuse that had taken place. I was confronted with this letter by diocesan officials and asked about its truth. By the grace of God -- and it was truly a moment of grace -- I admitted that indeed what was alleged was true. I was not in parish assignment at the time that the allegation came to light because I was scheduled to go away for further education. My diocese decided to continue with the plan to send me off for this education, but also made sure that I would be able to get therapy. Because this took place in the early '80's, when the treatment of sexual compulsivity was still in its infancy, my first treatment was not particularly effective.

A year later I was able to get involved in a therapy which was much more effective. There are other papers being written by persons far more competent than I to describe what makes for good treatment. I would simply mention that my therapist combined psychological insight with spiritual sensitivity and a demand that I accept responsibility for my behavior. These three factors have been key to my recovery.

Approximately six months after the diocese confronted me about my inappropriate behavior, the family of my primary victim informed the civil authorities of the abuse. Today, my diocese would alert authorities and initiate civil intervention.

After the civil intervention I withdrew from school and was assigned to an institutional, administrative job. Some very clear and specific limitations were placed on me: I was to have no pastoral contact with minors; I could not be physically present in the locale in which the abuse took place without prior permission from my diocese; I would meet with a member of the diocesan staff approximately once a month; I would have no parochial assignment or primarily pastoral assignment (such as hospital ministry), and I would continue in psychiatric therapy and spiritual direction. I would be able to serve as a chaplain to a community of religious women. In addition, I would disclose the history of my sexual activity to one or more of the persons I was living with, so that there would be accountability for my behavior in that locale.

The intervention is the first step in helping a sex offender recover. It is difficult to do, but it begins to set him free from the unbearable burden of keeping his behavior secret. A successful intervention requires complete honesty and compassion on the part of those who are confronting the alleged offender. A straightforward presentation of the allegation is best. While it was painful to have my sordid behavior brought into the light, it was not deadly. The kind concern of the officials who confronted me kept me from slipping into despair while letting me know that I could not continue as I had before.

It has been asserted, and I would fully agree, that victims have the right to expect a good response from a bishop when they make an allegation; they have a right to have their story believed, they have the right to an apology for harm done; restitution ought to be made, and there should be an assurance made that there would be prevention of any further misconduct by the offending individual.

By the same token the offender has a right to a good response from the bishop. He has a right to have his story believed until it is disproved and a right to a careful and fair investigation of any allegations made against him. He has a right to an exoneration if an allegation proves false, and he has a right to treatment.

A good intervention serves justice by making the perpetrator of abuse/exploitation accountable for his behavior and assuring the victim(s) that there will be no further misconduct.

THE PROCESS OF RECOVERY Recovery is a life long process and effective therapy is the crucial first step. I believe that there are a number of elements that are key for a good recovery after the completion of treatment. The first element is brutal honesty on the part of the recovering cleric. He must be willing to admit to himself and others exactly what is going on inside him in terms of fantasy, sexual attraction, etc. even if such an admission is painful or embarrassing. Only by being completely honest can he know any serenity. Secondly, he needs to have professional counseling and spiritual direction available to assist him in intervening early and effectively on the forces which would attempt to erode his recovery.

A third element is support from fellow clergy or other persons who would have a relationship with him of equal power. This support could come from structured groups as well as from authentic, close friendships. I am a member of three support groups and find them invaluable tools for my recovery. They are places where I can say exactly what is going on in my life with the assurance that I may be gently challenged but I will not be judged. The other members of the group know what I am struggling with because they have had to deal with their compulsivities. I have also developed intimate friendships with men and women which have helped me in many ways to maintain my recovery.

Fourthly, I believe that a consistent eucharistic community is critical for the recovery of a sex offender/priest. It is very difficult to retain one's identity as a priest if one has no community with which to celebrate. The opportunity to preside at the liturgies of a small community of religious

women has helped me to appreciate what a great gift ordination is. I am motivated to work hard at my recovery in order to avoid jeopardizing this gift.

The final element in recovery is meaningful work related to the mission of the Church. Like the opportunity to preside at Eucharist, an appropriate apostolic assignment is critical to the retention of priestly identity. I have known a number of priests who have returned from treatment with a professional evaluation indicating that they could return to a limited and safely-boundaried ministry, but who have found there is no work available for them. I have watched them lose touch with priesthood and become disillusioned. This is a great loss to the Church and a danger to all concerned. I believe that they are more at risk to reengage in inappropriate behaviors because they feel they have little to lose.

Diocesan Officials have a crucial role to play in recovery. They have the right and responsibility to demand an accounting of how the recovering priest is working his program. I check in regularly with an official of my diocese. It is a time when I reflect on various aspects of my life and submit the progress of my recovery to the judgment of an authority above me. This experience was humbling but also important for recovery. The delusion of being able to completely control my life was part of what got me in trouble. Having to submit my life to the judgment of another helps me to avoid an imbalance.

ATTITUDE TOWARD PASTORAL ASSIGNMENT I believe that the Church should make a reasonable attempt to find a suitable and safe ministry for an offender who is successfully recovering. When I first completed treatment, I was very anxious to return to parish ministry. I loved parish ministry, was good at it, and felt that any ministry but parish ministry was inadequate. In some ways I believed that if I could not be returned to parish ministry I would never fully be a priest again. It was as if parish ministry was the source of my happiness and well being, and if I couldn't be a parish priest I could never be completely happy.

About six years after my treatment began. I came to realize that my well being wasn't dependent on my assignment. Rather it was dependent on how I was doing in maintaining a good relationship with myself, with God, and with other significant human beings in my life. If those relationships are in good shape, I am a happy man; if those relationships are in some way impaired or in bad shape, then I am not happy, and no assignment, including whatever a "perfect" assignment might be, could make me happy. This was a significant shift in my own recovery process. I believe this could serve as a good indicator of a person's stage of recovery: if a person is looking for something outside of himself to make him happy, he is not doing very well in his recovery. Happiness comes from within.

It is easy for me to get far too involved in the work I do. This is true of the administrative work I currently do, and a parish assignment might make me even more vulnerable to getting over-identified with my work, crossing the boundaries of good self-care and depleting myself, which would in turn make me vulnerable to compulsive behavior. Even if this behavior did not lead to sexual acting-out, it would be unhealthy.

I am quite clear, now, that no assignment is more important to me than my recovery. Being a parish priest is no longer of paramount importance; having a ministry in which I can live safely and maintain my recovery is.

I feel that the criteria for a proper assignment are as follows: First, the assignment must be safe. For instance a pedophile should not be given an assignment intrinsically oriented to children. The assignment needs to be different from the offender's original setting. If a person was in a parish setting, that's not the first place to put the person back, because the elements that led to the acting-out, such as I described earlier, might well re-form and overwhelm the fledgling recovery of the offender. Secondly, for an offender to be ready for some kind of reassignment, he should have demonstrated that he knows how to maintain good boundaries in relationships. Thirdly, a proper re-assignment requires good disclosure, and this should be as public as possible. If the person is going to be working with a staff, that staff should have some sense of his background, so that they can be part of the system that helps him maintain his boundaries. The offender is responsible for maintaining his own boundaries, but alerting others to help him maintain them is a good external support for his recovery.

If you as a bishop are not comfortable in reassigning one of your priests, you should let him know that. An honest, straightforward explanation of your reasons is all you need give. It would be better for you to tell him up front that there is no hope for any assignment, or for the kind of assignment he may be requesting, rather than to string him along and be vague. It does no one any good to be vague. In my opinion, a choice never to reassign someone because they engaged in some kind of sexual misconduct is far too drastic. I believe there must be room for some kind of reassignment, but those reassignments have to be carefully made so that they can be safe and appropriate.

CONSEQUENCES When I was acting out sexually, I can remember having a number of fears about what would happen if my actions ever became known. I was afraid that if my friends knew that I was sexually abusing boys, they would reject me, and that my family would as well. I feared that the diocese would throw me out of priesthood. I feared that if the police got involved it could lead to court action and to jail. And my greatest fear was of public disclosure of my behavior.

Each and every one of these consequences happened to me, and each and everyone had a value. I discovered that good friends and family could still accept me, even though they knew of this horrible behavior that I had been involved in. I learned that my friends and family love me for whom I am even if I did bad things.

My diocese did not reject me or kick me out of priesthood, but rather helped me to get treatment and to live within more appropriate boundaries. I learned that my diocese valued and cared about me, even though I wasn't perfect.

The police and the courts got involved in my case and I was sentenced to a period of time in jail as well as to lengthy probation. During my time in jail I learned the meaning of unconditional love for the first time in my life, when many, many people from all parts of my life wrote to me and told me that even though they couldn't imagine why I did what I did, and did not approve of it, they still loved me. The words of God's love and forgiveness that I had been able to proclaim to many penitents and others seeking solace, I now heard for the first time for myself. The jail sentence was also very liberating because it was a concrete and definite punishment for my misconduct. I am able to say to the world, "Society set a price for what I did and I have paid that price."

Finally, the press became aware of my misconduct and made it widely known through newspapers, radio and TV. The public disclosure of my behavior was difficult, but it also set me free, because now I had no secrets.

I believe that there is a tendency to want to shield offenders from such consequences, but I would recommend that you shield them from none of these, because each consequence in their lives will have a value. I would also suggest that you avoid secrets. Don't help an offender to hide, and don't hold back information from affected parties. By putting information in the public sphere, by making the truth known, all parties -- particularly the offender --are helped to recover. If we keep secrets because we want to protect someone or spare someone, it leads to more pain.

REFLECTIONS My first reflection is a theological and spiritual one. It is this: that our belief in the resurrection of Jesus should lead us to believe that recovery is possible. The gospel is full of Jesus' proclamation that he has come to save sinners. The process of recovery is a testament to the healing power of God's love. To deny the possibility of recovery is to deny our belief in God's power to make all things new and whole. If we believe that recovery is possible, than we should not be afraid to restore recovering priests to appropriate ministries.

Secondly, I believe that the ultimate healing of the issue of sexual abuse in the Church will require just and appropriate treatment for the offender as well as the victim. The Church needs to deal with all parts of the system in order for true healing to take place. It is a temptation to make a scapegoat out of the offenders and to throw them away. But this doesn't heal the wound. It may appease certain angers; but it doesn't model what we believe about ourselves as the Church and as the People of God.

During the course of my recovery, I have had the opportunity to help a great many people by telling my story in person to various professional groups of various Church denominations, and to write my story in articles. I have joined with victims, and persons who have not experienced either victimization or offender status, in educating persons in authority in denominations as well as professionals who work with victims and offenders. I have found that many persons have been drawn to me because of my brokenness. My public sinfulness has made me more approachable, even for some who have experienced abuse at the hands of others.

Because I was not thrown away, I have been able to take what I have learned from my own recovery and make it a tool for healing. Recovering offenders can be a great resource for the healing of our Church and our society. We must not throw this resource away.

I would like to conclude my reflections by telling the story of an amazing reconciliation I was able to have with one of my victim who is now an adult. This young man was 16 years old when I engaged in sexually inappropriate touch with him. It happened over a very brief period of time and I masked the behavior by making it seem like it was part of wrestling. While I did not maintain a very close relationship with this young man, I knew his family and so remained in some contact with him over the intervening years. A couple of years ago, he asked me if I would be willing to baptize his child. I knew that I could not do that until I had the chance to discuss explicitly with him what I now knew to be my sexually inappropriate behavior.

I arranged an opportunity to talk with him, and with great nervousness, reminded him of the situation in which the abuse had taken place. I told him that from my point of view that behavior had been abusive, whether he had been aware of it or not, and that I wanted to apologize for it. I also suggested that if there was any healing work that he needed to do, I would be happy to direct him toward those resources. Finally, I told him that if he did not want me to be involved in any way with the baptism of his child, I would fully understand, and would accept whatever other consequences might result from my acknowledgment of my past inappropriate behavior.

After I had hesitatingly choked all this out, he looked at me, smiled and said, "I was wondering when you would get around to talking about this." He went on to explain that when my case became public, he realized that the behavior with him had been sexual. He had uneasy feelings about it, but he could never decide why it seemed odd to him. The public disclosure of my sexual offense made it clear. The consequences of my jail time, and his knowledge that I had worked very hard at my recovery, alleviated the anger that he first felt about the abuse. He saw my readiness to admit to him that I had abused him, as a sign of my further recovery. He reiterated his desire to have me baptize his child.

This is an extraordinary story of reconciliation. Most offenders would like the opportunity to be reconciled with their victims. The initiative for reconciliation, however, must generally come from the victim(s). The timing of reconciliation is difficult to judge. Victims involved need to be ready to express and release the feelings of hurt and betrayal. Offenders need to be ready to admit their guilt, seek forgiveness, and make amends. To attempt reconciliation without the above conditions in place is to court disaster, but to refuse to consider reconciliation is a denial of spiritual life.

The wounds' of sexual misconduct are painful and destructive but they are not perpetual or intractable. Let us maintain a spirit of hope that by proper and fair treatment of offenders and victims, the wounds of sexual misconduct can be healed.