

SPIRITUALITY AND THE CULTURE OF  
NARCISSISM

A study of the influence of pathological narcissism on the clerical sub-culture of the Roman Catholic Church and its influence on the formation of clerical and lay spirituality.

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August 30, 2013

# Spirituality and the Culture of Narcissism

## Part one, *The Clerical Sub-Culture*

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**Abstract:** Catholic deacons, priests and bishops live in a unique psychological environment commonly referred to as the “clerical world.” A fundamental characteristic of this sub-culture is narcissism which in some clerics becomes pathological. The narcissistic component of the clerical world has a toxic effect on its spirituality.

*Spirituality is an awareness of a personal relationship with a transcendent reality.*

Every religious tradition allows for persons of spirituality. Spirituality is independent of doctrine and discipline. The biblical psalms are preeminent examples of this traditional expression. A prominent example of this expression is a prayer of St. Augustine recorded in his *Confessions*:

*Late have I loved you*

*O Beauty ever ancient ever new.*

*Late have I loved you!*

*You were within me, but I was outside.*

*And it was there that I searched for you.*

*In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things that you created.*

*You were with me, but I was not with you.*

*Created things kept me from you;*

*Yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all.*

*You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.*

*You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.*

*You breathed your fragrance on me.*

*I drew in breath and now I pant for you.*

*I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.*

*You touched me, and I burned for your peace. (J. Ryan, 1960, p. 254)*

Two main sources support the development of Roman Catholic spirituality, the cult of saints and personal contact with a Catholic clergy person.

Because tradition presents a priest or bishop as a representative of God and Jesus a betrayal by them is profoundly destructive. Knowledgeable people have labeled the effects of sexual betrayal by a priest or bishop more devastating than those of incest. It is rightly called it *soul murder*. Our religious and clinical experience with victims of clergy abuse validates those observations and repeatedly records that the experience of abuse by clergy demolishes spirituality.

How is it possible that such a destructive dynamic can prevail in an institution of religion whose explicit purpose is to promote spiritual health? Experience with priest perpetrators demonstrates and confirms that he is a product of and participant in a culture that is rightly named narcissistic. An individual clergyman may or may not escape the toxicity of that culture.

The veneer of holiness and altruism that cloaks the institution of the Roman Catholic Church secretes a clerical culture infused by excessive narcissism. The institution is not what it appears in its public pronouncements, ritual manifestations, and glorious vesture. I have seen how its self-serving elements have had a pervasive destructive influence in propagating toxic spirituality that enables and fosters sexual assault on vulnerable children and minors and yet protects and projects an image perfection and moral purity.

The literature on narcissism, personal and cultural, is nearly epidemic. That ubiquity neither lessens its importance for understanding human behavior nor its significance in the crisis of sexual abuse of minors by men publicly proclaimed to be celibate therefore sexually safe. Nor can it be discounted as an element in a culture that selects, molds, produces and protects abusers despite its protestations of selfless service to God and humanity.

The thesis is simple and clear: Clerical Culture is the context of the sexual abuse of minors witnessed in the last half-century. This is no secret. The Prime Minister of Ireland addressing his parliament on July 20, 2011 said

that a recent report on the system of abuse in the Irish diocese of Cloyne (Kenney 2011); “Excavates the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism—the narcissism that dominate the Vatican to this day.” The cause of abuse by men who sexually violate children and the vulnerable within a church context is that they are products of formation and inculcation into the clerical system. That system of abuse can be traced from top to bottom. If the culture did not operate in ways that tolerated secret sexual activity of superiors (not necessarily child abuse) and function as a web of mutually supportive secret clerical liaisons, sexual abusers of minors would find no place in the system. As one highly placed American prelate said on his return from a trip to Rome: The organization to which I belong is rotten to the core and from the top down.

The clerical system from earliest days in seminary training throughout illustrious church careers conspires to hide sexual tendencies behind a veil of confessional secrecy—often by confessors and rectors (bishops and superiors) who themselves are not celibately observant. Known sexual activity—even behaviors with fellow seminarians and priests—is dismissed as “growing pains” or passing phases or even as salutary educational experience. Words, pronouncements and directives notwithstanding this is how the system operates.

The Catholic Church's institutional veneer of holiness covers a clerical culture marked by excessive narcissism. This narcissism has had a pervasive influence on the toxic clerical spirituality that has enabled the sub-culture of abuse. The path to wholeness and healing for many of the abused requires the discovery of an authentic clerical-free spirituality. The process of discovery involves the painful process of liberation from the controlling bonds of the institution. Here we explore the complex effect of institutionalized toxic narcissism and the steps that can lead to freedom and a healthy spirituality.

### **Normal Narcissism**

Any responsible consideration must account for the normal and necessary condition of narcissism at the infantile level of personality development. It is

self evident that most cultures go to great lengths foster children, keep them safe as they develop a sense of self worth based on the solid experiences *I am loved—I am loveable*. The self-centered supports necessary to secure a firm personality are transient and give way to maturing socialization where sharing and the sense *I can love* develops as the child matures. Thomas Traheme rightly observes, “*Had we not loved ourselves at all, we could never have been obliged to love anything. So that self-love is the basis of all love.*” (T. Traherne, 1672).

This journey to establish a foundation of love, self-confidence and mastery can also make a child vulnerable to unscrupulous and pernicious men (and women) who pose under the guise of helpers—in the case we are considering, Catholic priests. The clerical culture that we have discovered is ominous at best and destructive and perverted at worst and has not been adequately studied and analyzed. The widespread awareness of minor abuse across the Catholic Church gives urgency to its examination. Clergy abuse is a symptom of a cultural in dysfunction, spiritual bankruptcy and is unavoidable because it is criminal behavior.

The harm done to the normal development of youngsters from the experience of sexual or physical assault by the trusted is incalculable. The psychological steps to mature loving relationships are side tracked and in many cases destroyed. The self-absorption of men steeped in clerical culture is one element in their deficient empathy and disregard for the need for children to be protected. Innumerable bishops have given witness to their disregard for the rape and torture of children in favor of the primacy of the institution, its power, standing and reputation. Bishop Loris Waters gave voice to this unfathomable clerical attitude toward the effects of abuse in his statement: “*Little boys heal*” (L. Watters, personal communication, 1984).

### **Acquired Situational Narcissism**

How is such a perverted attitude that values institutional image over the protection of children get established? Since the Council of Trent each diocese was commissioned to set up seminaries to insure the education and formation of priests. Part of the process of introduction and survival in these

ecclesiastical enclaves involves a relinquishing to one degree or another ones self to a circumscribed, all male authority regulated, supposedly sexually abstinent group where conformity of mind and will are demanded and prized. These are “total institutions” which confer an alternative identity and security in exchange for the personal sacrifice. Little by little candidates immerse themselves in an atmosphere and function of a group that *has all the right answers* and is more powerful and important than any other entity. As a man moves up in the ecclesiastical system more conformity and obedience are expected and demanded for further advancement. Obedience that binds an individual (even blindly) to authority is the ultimate test of loyalty and proof that the individual can now justly assume institutional identity. There is little psychic distinction between self and institution and thus one’s value is subsumed by identification with the power, prestige, and status of the church. Clerical dress advertises the identity and elaborate public ceremony that dignifies prelates in impressive rich robes adds to the attraction to identify with the whole church institution suffused with its power, arrogance, vanity, and inordinate self-esteem. Certain cult-like qualities imbedded in the Roman Catholic culture remain to be teased out of the system for understanding. There are some strong personalities who can escape indoctrination to one degree or another and function maturely in the system. Not enough, however, to alter the system at this critical level. A large proportion of priests leave the ministry before the twenty-fifth anniversary of their ordination. Thirty percent of two graduating classes, 1966 and 1972, from a prominent American seminary turned out to be sexual abusers of minors. In fact, between six and nine percent of U.S. priests have violated children (Author’s personal research, unpublished). The operation of the system favors the production and preservation of psychosexual immaturity and narcissistic behaviors.

### **Altruism in the Service of Narcissism**

Clinical evaluations and long term experiences in seminaries and religious houses reveal many men who remain psychosexually immature. Often times those who *look best* rise to the top of the ranks. Their works can be exemplary and they can have good reputations among clergy and lay people. When they are discovered to have double lives many people who have

benefited from their good works are incredulous and rise to the defense of the offender. Elizabeth Bowen correctly observes: *“Nobody can be kinder than the narcissist while you react to life in his own terms”*.

The narcissist forces his colleagues and his victims to *play a role* assigned to him by God. The narcissist determines the agenda. Seducers are kind and disarming. Most priest child violators are not violent, but rather proceed under the cloak of care and kindness. Many can delude themselves that they are loving and helping the minor grow. The narcissism underlying their behavior is not hard to decipher when their whole history is revealed. Many of those who do not abuse minors participate in an atmosphere, climate, and operating culture that favors this kind of dichotomy and double life. Secrecy is the code and loyalty to the institution is the coin of the realm. A member violates either with great personal peril. The narcissist rewards compliance with his script and punishes any deviation from it with severe abuse. The narcissist conditions people around him using intimidation, positive and negative reinforcements and feedback, covert, or controlling abuse.

### **Institutional Malignant Narcissism**

In 1970, Otto Kernberg coined the term “malignant narcissism”; he pointed out that the sociopath was fundamentally narcissistic and without morality. Malignant narcissism includes a sadistic element, creating, in essence, a sadistic psychopath. The revelations about the sexual abuse of minors and how the institution produces and protects clergy abusers from the highest echelons on down betray the actual social construct of the Church. Its stated goals about the welfare of children weaken and wither in preference of avoiding scandal, salvaging the reputation of superiors, maintaining power and control and saving face. Narcissism is contagious. It creates a “magical universe”, similar to a cult; within its ken special rules apply. It does not conform to external reality, but relies on the power of its construct (Cf O. Kernberg, 1975).

Sociopaths—those without empathy and conscience—flourish in the institutional atmosphere of the Roman Catholic clerical system. Obedience, not charity or justice is the guiding principal within the clerical structure. In the center of the vow cardinals take before the pope is the phrase: I vow to

keep secret anything confided to me that if revealed would cause harm or scandal to the Church. The blind obedience to authority (the pope) extolled and inculcated in clerics on every level of the institution kills the development of spirituality. It distorts conscience because truth is subservient to the institutional mind that is dedicated primarily to self-preservation at all costs. A lie is not a lie if spoken according to institutional values. As Bishop John Ricard said to one of his priests who related it to me: “I only lie when I have to”. This aspect of the clerical institution becomes patently clear in a review of cardinals’ and bishops’ depositions regarding clergy abusers. The scarlet bond that unites church authorities—and all Catholic clergy by extension—holds the institution in a monarchical system that demands obedience, silence and cover up of imperfections at the expense of real protection and service. Victims of clergy narcissists often come to assimilate the narcissist's way of thinking and his modus operandi—his methods in self-destructive ways. The narcissist seldom abandons his victims. He resides deep inside the traumatic memories, torturing the victims and well meaning disciples, like an alien snatching bodies.

The continuing exposure of the institutional system that fosters and protects child abuse *by its narcissistic nature* offers us an opportunity to analyze its structure and indicate a direction for a spirituality of reform.

Any spirituality of reform must free itself from the institutional bonds of fear, shame, and guilt that the narcissistically malignant institution instills with its process of control and the exercise of its power. Only willful blindness and pathological denial can allow one to overlook the reality that the symptom of clerical abuse reveals a Roman Catholic Church as dysfunctional and corrupt sexually and financially as during the time of the Protestant Reformation. Only a spirituality that confronts the institution in a fundamental way will meet the current need of Catholic Christians.



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From T. Traherne, *Centuries, Fourth Century, N. 55.* 1672, first published in 1908.

# Spirituality and the Culture of Narcissism

## Part two, *Clinical Observations*

Marianne Benkert, M.D.

**Abstract:** Clinical practice can offer the psychiatrist and therapist a unique insight into the institutional functioning of the Roman Catholic Church and its clerical culture. The Church has shown itself to be a pathologically narcissistic institution, concerned with its own image, at the cost of service to the people. Protection of the clerical culture and lack of empathy has fostered the sexual abuse of minors with no regard for the life long consequences and suffering of the victims. It is a homosocial society that demeans women and children. Several case presentations will be made to illustrate the damage done to the victims of clerical sexual abuse, and the lack of empathy present in their abusers.

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During my forty-five years in practice as a psychiatrist and a woman who was raised Catholic, I have been privileged to know, and consult with a number of men and women who demonstrated the most refined level of spiritual expression within religious life. They were in the clerical culture but not of it. I am not certain how they escaped the toxicity of prevailing narcissism with its lack of empathy but they possessed a depth of character and maturity with flexibility of personality that allowed them to work in a complex environment and culture that does not favor integrity.

The number of patients who gave testimony to the abuse and violation by priests, enabled by the monarchical structure of the Church strained to the breaking point my capacity to connect the spirit of Christ with the operation of the clerical system.

In my own clinical experience the victims of clerical sexual abuse were predominantly women who had been violated as young girls by priests and nuns. In contrast, the files of bishops reported statistics where young boys

between the ages of eleven and fourteen were the most common victims of priest assaults. The women and men who ultimately reported abuse to me neither offered it as a presenting problem nor pursued it in litigation. They came to therapy concerned about their depression, suicidal ideation, excessive anxiety, family discord or their inability to manage the stress in their everyday life.

A woman who felt overwhelmed in dealing with her teen-aged children took many sessions to reveal she had been seduced as a twelve year old girl by a priest after she confided her sexual concerns in the confessional. She never lost the burden of shame she felt when he pursued her sexually time after time. She told no one. She saw him at Mass with her family on Sundays; he cut an impressive figure in his grand vestments and captivated the congregation with his eloquent sermons. Her family admired and trusted him. He cultivated adulation. She was left with her shame and guilt. He gave no evidence that he understood her distress. This was a man incapable of true empathy.

A man has simply to put on a roman collar to garner deference and respect regardless of his lack of merit or personal achievement. His identity comes from “putting on” the culture of status and superiority. When this is coupled with an assignment of some power or distinction he can fulfill expectations of favorable treatment including automatic compliance with his requests, even those that seem questionable.

At the beginning of each school year one pastor used to send a request to the fourth grade teacher in the parish school to send five girls to his office to help him with paper work. Week by week he would pare down the group to the one he selected as a special helper. He groomed her and then sexually abused her telling her how special she was. (Of course he was very special to be able to take these secret liberties with ten-year-old girls.) Vowed to silence over their “precious” friendship she could not share the experience with anyone. As a married fifty-year-old woman, with two teen-age children she shared the secret with her husband. At one of our psychotherapy sessions, she said to me (Benkert) “*I want to show you something.*” She

wept as she took the well-worn death card of this priest out of her purse.

One middle-aged woman approached therapy after the death of her mother. She was in mourning and troubled about strain in her family relationships. After a time she confided the story of her widowed mother's multiple illnesses and the burden this placed on her as a child in grade school. Her mother would send her to the parish house to ask the pastor to come visit her. Dutifully but fearfully, she would run to the rectory to deliver the request. The priest would come only after he fondled and abused her. As the little girl grew up she realized that the priest also had sex with her mother during his visits. The double betrayal and the burden of secrecy took a heavy toll on her life, rippling out to her marital and family relationships. She bore a lifetime sentence that affected her most intimate relationships.

In reality, a double clerical life is more common than not. Public ministry can often be productive and admirable. Because every man must make a promise of "perfect and perpetual chastity" prior to his ordination to the priesthood, compromises between his public ministry and his response to personal sexual drives can be devious and destructive. Between six and nine percent (6-9%) of U.S. clergy get sexually involved with underage boys and girls. The John Jay Study commissioned by the American bishops stated in their Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>, 2004 report that 6.5% of priests ordained between 1960 and 1984 were ultimately recorded as sexually involved with minors (K. Terry, 2004, pp. 36-65) Figures from some dioceses run between 10% and 12% (Boston and Los Angeles).

The exploitation and sexual abuse of minors is illegal and only one of the ways priests and bishops defy their vows. The number of victims and the serious consequences of the abuse are monumental. The number of girls who have suffered abuse by priests is grossly under reported or recorded. As adults, they suffer tremendous reluctance and inner resistance to reveal the violation to their husbands but especially to their children. Their motivation involves protection of the family from their humiliation. They are abandoned to the prison of secrecy. The long-term physical, psychological

and spiritual consequences of betrayal by a trusted figure have been demonstrated over and over again by clinical experience.

An important ongoing work illustrating this connection is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. The ACE Study is ongoing collaborative research between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, GA, and Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, CA. The Co-principal Investigators of The Study are Robert F. Anda, MD, MS with the CDC, and Vincent J. Felitti, MD, with Kaiser Permanente. Over 17,000 Kaiser patients participating in routine health screening volunteered to participate in The Study. They provided detailed information about their childhood experience of abuse, neglect and family dysfunction. Data resulting from their participation continues to be analyzed; it reveals staggering proof of the health, social and economic risks that result from childhood trauma. To date, more than 50 scientific articles have been published and more than 100 conference and workshop presentations have been made.

Priests who are involved in sexual liaisons with female partners of a more appropriate age can experience pressure and guilt when they are confronted with their misuse of power and authority. If a pregnancy occurs the priest's reaction frequently is on himself and what will happen to his career. Their narcissism is evident. Not surprisingly many priests abandon their partner at this time of crisis or encourage her to have an abortion.

Often priests express the idea that they work hard and “deserve” the pleasure of a sexual relationship. The clerical culture is saturated with sexuality. An adult man told me (Benkert), “ I was sexually abused by a priest when I was fourteen while on retreat when I was a student at the minor seminary.” Some of his peers had the same experience, and they defined it “as a rite of passage.” The sexual bond acts as a chain that binds the culture together. Many young men studying for the priesthood are selected by seminary teachers or rectors to be part of their sexual inner circle. The initial approach can be intellectual or social but progresses to sexual exchanges and

socializing that often leads to connections in ever-higher echelons of the diocese.

There is a sexual cabal within the structure of dioceses and religious communities. It is bound by secrecy and sealed by mutual knowledge of sexual involvement past or present. The seal of confession is the model of the confidence clergy place in each other to keep the dynamic in place.

Catholic priests and bishops benefit from expectations of the faithful that they are sexually safe and have a level of sexual self-control that approaches perfection. This is a myth that is propagated by the narcissistic clerical system and culture.

Nuns were a subjugated and indentured group that was enlisted to support this concept. Nuns sometimes overlooked the obvious indications that priests were sexually abusing minors and even deluded themselves when they were asked to deliver children—frequently orphans—to priest's quarters. It was unthinkable that the nuns would question clerical behavior even if they had questions. They too often were part of the system.

In the clerical culture women are devalued and easily used and denigrated. Two women alone deserve regard, the Blessed Virgin Mary and their own mothers for whom they have endless devotion. Other women are servants but unworthy of equality or real power. Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI quoted John Paul II who insisted that popes do not have the power to ordain women to the priesthood, a claim not validated by theology. Ordination of women would change the clerical culture and alter the present homosocial structure demanding a level of psychosexual maturity not currently possible.

Many of the priests who abused my patients or who I have evaluated are psychosexually and socially immature. They pick immature and vulnerable victims and inject themselves into their lives without concern for harmful effects. They function in an atmosphere of unbridled underdevelopment where they operate above laws and do not have to live with the consequences of their behavior. They consider themselves special and

entitled. One priest admitted to having twenty-two young women sexual partners without thought or concern for the welfare of any of them. Another priest admitted to sexually abusing three hundred young people, mostly boys. Their lack of empathy was startling. Frequently clergy abusers reassure their victims that they are demonstrating “God’s love” in their very act of violation.

This arrogance, self-centeredness, sense of entitlement, exploitation, lack of empathy for victims, and rejection of responsibility for destructive behaviors demonstrated in the distorted sexuality of so many Catholic clergy reveals their formation, participation and tolerance in a culture that can only be identified as narcissistic (See American Psychiatric Association, 2000, pp. 714-717). It is compounded by bishops and superiors who hear the reports of violations. Most do not understand the horror the victims suffer. They think of sin, and the forgiveness of the abuser but not in terms of the crime and enduring suffering and destruction of the victim. Time and time again they use various stages of denial to minimize the harm done to the victim and concentrate on how to keep the errant priests in ministry, and protect the image of the Church.

The all male secret clerical culture combined with the exclusion and devaluation of women and children form the perfect setting for a flourishing institutional pathological narcissism.

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## Spirituality and the Culture of Narcissism

### Part Three, *Authentic spirituality-From Control to Freedom*

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**Abstract:** The spirituality common to lay Catholics is, in fact, a by-product of the clerical spirituality that is highly narcissistic in nature. It is a toxic spirituality that not only enables sexual abuse by clerics, but causes severe and lasting damage to victims. Survival often requires a radical re-assessment of the fundamental teachings about the nature of the institutional Church, the nature of the priesthood and the understanding of the anthropomorphic god.

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*“Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)*

The institutional Catholic Church's veneer of holiness covers a deeply embedded clerical culture marked by excessive narcissism. This narcissism has had a pervasive influence on shaping the traditional spirituality common to Catholicism. The vibrancy of this clerical spirituality is exquisitely refined within the experience of sexual abuse by a bishop or a priest. This is not unlike the psychic processes used by the torturers of the Inquisition wherein pain was inflicted and justified by a superior clerical power. Although Church writings and teachings often refer to the “spirituality of the laity” the institutional Catholic Church does not promote or support an authentic spirituality for laypersons that is rooted in the essence of Christianity. The so-called lay spirituality is a by-product of the narcissistic spirituality that pervades the clerical culture. This toxic clerical spirituality is the most influential factor in the hierarchy's widespread enabling of sexual abuse by clerics. In this process of enabling, the grooming of the victims, a prelude to the actual sexual molestation, depends on their subservience to the offending cleric. This belief in the superiority of the cleric is a direct result of the institutionalized narcissism, which also causes significant confusion in the victims' perception of their own religiosity.



The magical image of the cleric's superior position, fed by the self-serving narcissistic spirituality, not only facilitates the initial molestation but also contributes as well to almost certain re-victimization. The clash between the dependent, submissive religiosity of the victim and the narcissistic religiosity of the priest-perpetrator is traumatic enough but the trauma is then intensified by the equally stunning betrayal by the hierarchical leadership of the church. This betrayal begins on the local level with the victims' own bishops and extends all the way to the Vatican. This dynamic depends on the fundamental demand for blind obedience and is a condition for advancement within the clerical system.

The symptoms of the collision include anger and even rage at clergy and all things associated with the institutional church along with a rejection of one's Catholic past and most if not all of the trappings, customs and symbols of Catholicism. Many sexual abuse victims experience uncontrollable anger, nausea, anxiety or even panic when entering a Catholic Church or upon seeing robed churchmen. The sense of anger and rejection often remain though sometimes they transcend from controlling the victim to being controlled by him or her. The image of god so deeply internalized by most Catholics often causes victims to proclaim themselves as atheists. The deep wounds from the abuse do not often allow the victim to pass from rejection of all things Catholic to a state of emotional and psychological neutrality about the church. The anger and hostility may be kept under control but it is still present.

The victim's religiosity or toxic spirituality, conditioned by obedience and imposed by the institutional Church, has been completely perverted and turned to a massive, festering wound. It is often at this point that the person begins to consciously appreciate the loss of spirituality. While before it was identified with feelings, liturgies and quiet subservience to the clergy it is now identified by many as an emptiness or loss that they cannot adequately explain but which they know is associated with significant aspects of their life.

The betrayal extends beyond the clergy. All too often the reaction of parents and the Catholic community deepen the victims' feelings of guilt and shame and increase their isolation. Many parents admonished or even punished their children for saying such "terrible filthy things about a priest." Bishops and other church officials have rarely responded with understanding and affirmation of what had happened. The almost universal initial response from the bishops (or pastors) had been to deny, minimize if denial didn't work, or shift any blame from the priest to any of a variety of external targets not excluding the victim him or herself. If the accusation achieved any degree of public awareness and the lay church community rallied around the accused priest, as they still often do to this day, the victim was pushed even further into the tunnel of hopelessness and guilt.

Bishops and other Church officials have very rarely responded to victims with compassionate understanding and an affirmation of the sexual violation. Clerical spirituality is shielded and defended behind ramparts of secrecy and denial. The victim who dares to speak up violates a sacred law of silence that bridges those defenses and hence becomes an enemy combatant.

The church culture within which Catholics were formed had an institutionalized spirituality that severely influenced, in a clearly toxic manner, the victims' processing of the sexual abuse and their subsequent treatment by the Church leaders. This toxicity even influenced the reactions of the victim's own family to the shocking revelations of abuse. Likewise the Church's public and private responses and the attitudes of individual clerics and laypersons have been shaped by a spirituality that favors the dominant sexless clerical caste.

The traditional Catholic lay spirituality is grounded in the relationship of those in holy orders to lay Catholics and the influence they have over their lives. The exalted and powerful role of priests and bishops is dependent on a theological construct that is, according to official teaching, rooted in the Divine Will. In other words, the Church teaches that the way lay people have been taught to respond to clerics is the way God wants it to be. An excerpt

from a 1906 encyclical by Pope Pius X clearly describes the official stratification of the Catholic Church which persist to this day (1906):

*This Church is in essence an unequal society, that is to say a society comprising two categories of persons, the shepherds [bishops and higher] and the flock. These categories are so distinct that the right and authority necessary for promoting and guiding all the members toward the goal of the society resides only in the pastoral body [the bishops]; as to the multitude, its sole duty is that of allowing itself to be led and of following its pastors as a docile flock.*

Much of the Catholic's spirituality is inordinately tied up with externals: the drama of the traditionally rich Catholic liturgy, the deeply engrained conviction that God in the person of Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, the various vestments used at rituals and liturgies and the elaborate robes worn by the prelates. The measure of a spiritual experience is often the emotional reaction to a liturgical event, an ecclesiastical personage or a personal experience. Clerics are presumed by the laity to be "holier" than lay people simply because of their clerical status and their ordination. The glorification of the priest or bishop in the elaborately vested central figure of Catholic liturgies supports this erroneous and harmful belief. The higher a bishop or priest rose on the clerical ladder the holier he was presumed to be since only holy people favored by the Holy Spirit moved up in the church hierarchy and in the clerical culture.

This construct is not difficult to understand. Through Christ, God founded the institutional Church and instituted the twelve apostles as the first bishops, singling St. Peter out to be the first pope. The Church as a spiritual movement and way of life and the Church as a socio-political institution are one and the same according to official teaching. For centuries Catholics were taught that membership in the church is essential for the eternal salvation of anyone. Furthermore membership included the absolute requirement of submission to the pope. This doctrine was explicitly stated by Pope Boniface VIII in his famous yet controversial decree, *Unam Sanctam* on November 18, 1302. The absolute nature of this teaching was significantly mitigated to the point of being abandoned by many theologians

and Church leaders after Vatican Council II (1962-1965). This exclusivity has been revived in the present era however, fostered by the official Roman Catholic teaching that Christian denominations that do not have what the Catholic Church deems valid bishops and a true Eucharist are not "churches" in the authentic sense of the word. Furthermore their members do not have access to the full means of salvation (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000, paragraphs 17 and 22). Consequently the hierarchical governmental structure is essential to a Catholic's quest for salvation since it is willed such by God. The bishops are the pillars of the governmental structure and therefore they are essential not only to the Church as an organization but also to each and every member. Christ instituted a priesthood that serves as an extension of the episcopate. The bishops and priests control the seven sacraments upon which Catholic incorporation is grounded. Catholics need the seven sacraments, the fundamental rituals of the Church, for their spiritual existence and access to the sacraments is controlled by the clerics.

Very few victims are able to distinguish between their faith in God, their faith in the community of the Church and their faith in the churchmen directly involved with their abuse; most are not able to separate the abuse and the abuser from the Church primarily because of the nature of their Catholic training. They are not able to make a fundamental distinction between the Church as the "People of God," the community of all believers, from the institutional governmental structures. In the minds and imaginations of many, the "Church" equals bishops, priests, rituals and the clerical culture though few are able to perceive the clerical sub-culture as an entity deeply entwined in a toxic way with the Church as a community. Central to Catholicism is the Eucharist, which is the reenactment of the Last Supper at which Christ becomes present under the appearances of bread and wine. The words of the priest (or bishop) over the bread and wine turn these elements into the Body and Blood of Christ, a phenomenon known as *transubstantiation*. Thus the priest has been described in Catholic theology and Catholic culture as an *alter Christus* or "another Christ." This is the source of the commonly held yet erroneous belief that a priest takes the place of or represents Christ in a unique way. The identification of the priest

with Christ is defined in terms of power and not in terms of compassion and love.

Although the doctrinal claims bases for all the elements of this construct are highly dubious, the official Church has held to them for centuries; they constitute the absolute basis for the Church's power, influence and control. That which cannot be confirmed by scriptural or other recorded sources is, according to official Church teaching, grounded in authentic tradition, which is considered by the institutional Church to be as authentic a source of divine revelation as the scriptures.

It is not difficult to see how the official foundation for those in holy orders can lead to the acquisition of the key symptoms of narcissism. The effect of such a narcissistic theology has detrimental effects on all members of the Church but disastrous effects on those harmed by priests or bishops. Most victims of clergy abuse were brought up in devout and often traditional Catholic families and thus raised in an atmosphere that supported without qualification the unquestioning belief in all that is taught about the Church's "sacred ministers." Almost universally clergy victims describe being imbued from childhood with the belief that the priest is an exalted and sacred personage who is closer to God than mere lay people and who in fact represents and speaks for God. This position is strongly supported by official teaching and unofficial commentary (cf Doyle, 2006, pp. 189-213) Victims, as with all Catholic children, were taught to revere priests and bishops, to obey them without question and never to say or even think anything ill of them.

Young men training for the priesthood are enmeshed in the clerical world from the very beginning of their intellectual and spiritual formation. In some cases this experience began after high school but formerly it was not uncommon for many priests to attend a minor seminary that started after completion of primary school. Young clerics in training quickly learn that the supreme values are docility and obedience. Any expression of originality, creativity or uniqueness, often referred to derisively as "singularity" was not only frowned upon but could terminate a young

seminarian's aspirations. As seminarians the young priests-to-be are taught to have the highest reverence for priests.

The seminary environment is an all-male, homosocial enclave in which the sharp distinctions of the clerical social structure are made even sharper as the young men learn that in order to survive they must do the equivalent of surrendering their individuality to the corporate (often called the "community") identity, blending in and avoiding any creative thinking that was either at or outside the boundaries of the clerical culture's perception of itself. They are taught that bishops are, among other things, the Church's "official teachers" which means that they have the final word on the meaning of any Church teaching from mundane matters to the so-called essential truths of the faith. In essence this means that bishops are right even when they are wrong!

Upon ordination the young cleric's world changes dramatically. In the course of the ordination liturgy he is given what he has been taught are the awesome powers of the priest. He is now admitted to the inner circle of the sacred clerical world, a world that depends for its survival on the exalted and mystical theology of the priesthood but also upon a veil of secrecy that protects the clerical world and helps maintain the illusion of mystery and power. This dimension tends to reinforce narcissism and strip the cleric of empathy. Throughout his years of training the seminarian practiced docility, obedience and deference realizing all the while that the day would come when he would enter this mysterious and privileged class. The understanding of the priesthood is not shaped by service to others and a fundamental equality of all People of God. Rather, the emphasis is on the powers given at ordination, the superiority of the celibate, clerical life and the identification of the priest with Jesus Christ.

The traditional Catholic teaching on human sexuality is woven into the clericalist spirituality in such a way that it has a harmful impact on both victim and priest-perpetrator. Priests and their victims are both taught that any sexual act, thought or desire outside of marriage is a mortal sin which, unless absolved by a priest in confession, can be a potential sentence of eternity in hell. Catholic children are immersed in this distorted and harmful

teaching before they even realize what sexuality is all about and are taught that once they attain the age of seven they have reached the age of reason and are therefore capable of a mortal sin. Priests on the other hand, though they too have been immersed in the traditional teaching are also taught that by the assumption of celibacy they are raised to a higher level of human existence since the virginal or chaste state is significantly higher than the married state and all because of absence of any form of sexual contact. Many priests work celibacy into their self-image seeing it as a sign of a special divine power shared with them and as an aspect of their lives that distinguishes them from all others.

Sexual violation of a Catholic minor by a priest is especially destructive precisely because of the victim's toxic belief system about the church, salvation and the priest. Unlike ministers of other Christian denominations, priests are identified not as representatives of Christ but with Christ himself. The grooming and seduction are mistaken by victims, parents and most other observers as an innocent interest, often welcomed and encouraged by parents. When the abuse itself finally happens most victims have described their reactions with words like "paralyzed," "dumbfounded," "stunned" and "afraid." If the abuse continued and the victim was drawn into what has been erroneously described as a "relationship" but which actually is a toxic bond, the victim's Catholic nurture and conditioning provide the explanation for the often-confounding reaction to the priest-perpetrator.

Many devout victims believe priests to be devoid of sexual feelings and urges rendering them immune from sexual sin. They often assume that the sexual assault, though clearly against their will, nevertheless results in serious sin on their part. Some have even expressed the belief that since priests are not only sexless but also sinless, the molestation was their own fault. This disastrous belief is encouraged by the public pronouncements of numerous bishops and priests. Other victims believe that they had to assume the guilt not only for their assault but they also had to assume a degree of moral responsibility for the priest. Tragically many priests reinforced this self-destructive thinking by various kinds of threats and intimidation to keep the victim silent.

The institutionalized spirituality in which Catholics were formed has been a negative influence in the emotional and psychological processing of the experience of the physical abuse and subsequent betrayal by the hierarchy and even betrayal by one's own family. As young Catholics grew up and presumably matured their spirituality remained in its infantile state. For many Catholic parents, brought up in a culture marked throughout by the fundamental stratification solidly based on the inequality between cleric and lay, their dependent spirituality never advanced and thus they and their children shared the same magical thinking, the same fears and the same distorted ideas about authority, priesthood and human sexuality.

Unfortunately many Catholics believe that spirituality is something learned, practiced and perfected, marked by various kinds of self-denial, cynicism about material things and suspicion about the secular world. Pre-Christian stoicism had a profound influence on the dualistic theology developed by the early Church's most influential teachers. This dualism provides the backdrop for the value system preached by the official Church. The values of the secular world inhabited by the Catholic laity are diametrically opposed to the values of the ideal world envisioned by the Church's clerical leadership. The popes of the present era have regularly decried the disastrous effects of secularism, materialism and relativism on contemporary society. Pope Benedict XVI, like his predecessor John Paul II, used his exalted role as chief teacher of the Church to propagate the notion that the primary cause of sexual abuse has been the harmful influence of the secular culture with its unbridled sexuality on clerics and victims alike.

Lay spirituality is often evaluated by the degree of emotional response to the regularly attended liturgical services, unquestioning obedience to all Church teachings -- whether these are communicated by the pope or the parish priest -- material generosity and all-around docility, obedience and deference to members of the clergy. Although some laypersons achieve a more mature degree of authentic spirituality this is rarely the case with the majority of Catholics. The separation from the controlling clerical culture poses an emotional threat many cannot overcome. The subservient role of all laypersons is evident in the Church's liturgical celebrations.



The reforms emanating from Vatican Council II (1962-1965) launched an emancipation process for laypersons. They were given a variety of roles in the Mass and in other sacramental celebrations which, though secondary in importance were nevertheless a significant advance over the silent role assigned to the laity in the past. Other positions in Church administration including in the canonical courts were opened up to laymen and women. It is perhaps coincidental yet no less important to note that with the public revelations of widespread sexual abuse that began in the mid-eighties, the Vatican leadership also initiated a series of changes in liturgical rules that minimized lay participation and at the same time exalted the roles of the priest. These various changes have been interpreted by many as an attempt to "re-clericalize" the Church in the wake of advances in lay influence that have threatened the unquestioned dominance of the clergy.

The path to wholeness and healing begins with the acceptance of the radical distinction between religiosity and spirituality. Healing from abuse is strongly enhanced if the victim can discover an authentic spirituality that is completely independent of the constraints imposed by the clerical culture. The process of discovery involves the painful but necessary liberation from the controlling narcissistic shackles of the institution. These clerically imposed fetters severely impede the person from venturing beyond the narrow, guilt-enforced servitude that passes for spirituality.

The survival of the narcissistic clerical spirituality depends on the unquestioning belief in the image and role of the stern and sometimes angry and vengeful god at the center of institutionalized Catholicism. Throughout the Church's history the hierarchy has succeeded in propagating an anthropomorphic vision of God as a supreme "being" with likes and dislikes, anger and resentments just like them. This all-powerful super being remains primarily accessible to the pope and the bishops. Catholics are taught to believe that they need the clergy to communicate with this Supreme Being and especially to be forgiven by this being through the mediation of the clergy when they have strayed. Much of Catholic moral theology is tied up with avoiding sexual sin, defined by the Church as a grave offense against God.

The bishops and clergy control sin, sinners and forgiveness. The popes and bishops lay claim to the God-given authority to interpret what is and what is not a sin and even the authority to name new sins. If one is freed from the control and the many "Catch 22's" of Catholic law and theology and is able to look at the entire theological construct from a significant distance, the preposterous dimensions of the sources of control become astonishingly clear. At this point the causal connection between the need for an image of a controlling god and the narcissistic clerical spirituality becomes obvious. The discovery of a healthy, authentic narcissistic-free spirituality can often be a powerful dimension of the healing process. The first phase is often the recognition that the anger and profound sense of betrayal is not sacrilegious but both justified and appropriate. There needs to be a transition from the emotional response to the Church and its clerical culture, almost always negative, to a cognitive recognition of the radical distinction between the toxic beliefs and magical thinking that controlled the victim and an authentic spirituality free of dependence on the institutional clerical Church. This of course must include, of necessity, a re-examination and re-thinking of the nature and role of the priesthood. The priest-perpetrator must be de-mythologized so that any remnants of control based on his narcissistically distorted and exalted role are banished.

At the heart of the journey of spiritual re-birth is the concept of God. The deep-seated damage done to the victim's soul will only begin to heal allowing a spiritual re-birth when the attachment to an anthropomorphized god as an all-powerful pope-bishop-priest is eradicated and replaced by an object of belief that is not imposed from without but which is owned by the victim.

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