

Enough already!

Some people are stoking the hysteria over clerical abuse for their own ends

Celia Wolf-Devine | Sep 5 2018 | 



Paedophilia and other forms of sexual abuse are terrible things. But the intensifying hysteria surrounding clerical sexual abuse needs to be brought under control. This sort of thing tends toward an epidemic of witch hunting in which the innocent are often swept away with the guilty. Even Pope Francis was taken in by false accusations against a Spanish priest, Father Ramon Martinez, in 2014. He acted forcibly against him, only to discover later that the charges were lies.

People in the grip of hysteria can be manipulated to believe every lurid thing they hear and to grasp at “solutions” proposed that do not solve the problem,

and often exacerbate the situation.

Now that a culture of accusation outside the Church has made it easier to bring charges, there have been a number of false charges of rape and racial harassment. Some people, sad to say, are stoking the fires in order to advance their own agendas. Those who hate religion or the Church, of course, do so in order to destroy it.

Some people who are hostile to Pope Francis want to use it to unseat him. Conservatives, disturbed by Francis's more left-leaning political and economic views are likely to throw in their lot with the accusers. Others have agendas, such as a married clergy or the defence of capital punishment, that have to be considered on their own merits and not confused by association with paedophilia.

First, why all of a sudden, is there a new outbreak of panic? It has been several years since clerical abuse scandals were first brought to our attention. So why be astounded that things of a similar sort were going on other places as well? Similar patterns are at work in all these.

A number of these cases are very old (some of them went back 70 years) and memories, as we know, become less reliable at a distance. In the 1950s, which some traditionalists hail as a wonderful golden age, a great deal of child abuse was going on – a lot of it intra-familial or within the community.

Perhaps the breakdown of the extended family was part of the problem, for members of an extended family can be on the watch for problems while the nuclear family isolates the couple and their children. Of course, extended family members can sometimes abuse children also, but generally they are more likely to blow the whistle than those

immediately affected. In incest cases, the wife can be too horrified and traumatized to believe it happened and to stand up and confront it. The damage it did was poorly understood back at the time many of the offenses occurred.

The received wisdom at that time was that making a big fuss would damage the child worse. Sexual abuse occurred in all sorts of situations where vulnerable, troubled children were under the care of scout leaders, therapists, pastors, babysitters, teachers, camp counsellors, etc. Priests were not uniquely at fault.

The fact that certain sexual patterns like pederasty are often so deeply ingrained as to be addictive and unchangeable was not known. A priest who confessed and promised never to do it again, was often given the benefit of the doubt, and another chance in a new parish, when he should not have been. Yes, priests tend to band together to support each other, but had all the things we know now been known then, most of them would not have covered for pederasts.

The fact that the priesthood includes some men who are non-practicing homosexuals or who lapse only very rarely does not mean they would support sex with children. So, those who want to stampede us into severe crackdowns on all homosexuals are making things worse. Some very saintly priests have been non-practicing homosexuals.

The sorts of cases differ widely in seriousness and circumstances. A fumbling caress is very different from forcible rape. A nine-year-old is different from a 16-year-old. In some cases, there is genuine affection on one or both sides, in others pure lust was operative. Some children who had been abused by others acted in a sexually provocative way to a priest who was lonely and weak. Not that that

exonerates them, but it puts a different complexion on things.

When something involves sex, people tend to get unglued. Lots of people have a heavy load to carry due to parental alcoholism, suicide, emotional, physical, and psychological abuse, and experiences of domestic violence. We suffer from all sorts of wounds, or at least my friends and I do.

I have one friend whose mother committed suicide and tried to kill both her daughters with her. My friend's sister died, while she survived. Imagine carrying that all your life. Compared to things like that, bad sexual experiences pale. Given a choice of being inappropriately groped or finding one's mother's dead body after she killed herself I'd go for being groped in a flash. My abuse was intra-familial.

I was not raised a Catholic. I suppose being brought up to think priests are all totally holy and like God would make bad experiences with them especially traumatic. Victims need to turn directly to God for healing. He will bring into their lives the right people to help them. Lots of people unrelated to you wringing their hands over your victimization could just lock you into a victim identity. You have to throw things over your shoulder and move forward.

One thing that might help would be some of the techniques charismatics use for healing of memories. I was blessed in that in my crisis at age 12, I prayed and Jesus came to my help. God alone can heal very deep things. Being able to have a friendship with a priest who is psychologically and emotionally healthy might help. The priest who helped me is 15 years younger than me and said he had been able to help many people older than himself with their father problems.

But let God bring the right people to help the healing. If they pray, abuse victims will find that God will bring the right people into their lives to heal them. Some drippingly pious old priest offering to be a father figure to me would not have been right. You can't force these things.

My fear is that all sorts of people are stoking and manipulating the hysteria over clerical abuse for their own ends, without thinking of the damage they are doing to the faithful who love the Church. We need to turn down the heat. This does not mean denying the evils but just not letting them make us become unglued. We live in a fallen world. God holds all things in His hands.

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See also her blog Progressive, Pro-Woman, Pro-life.*