

# Educating To End Abuse

## Dispelling Myths: Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse

There are many myths associated with adult clergy sexual abuse. These myths are damaging and inhibit justice for victims within the court systems in the United States. The clergy/parishioner relationship is no different than other professional relationships where there is a fiduciary duty. The "professional", whether it be a teacher, therapist or clergy has a fiduciary duty to whomever they have a professional relationship. A fiduciary duty is a relationship based on trust. The Latin definition for fiduciary is none other than 'faith'. The trust or "faith" in a fiduciary duty relationship is established even before the relationship begins. The trust does not have to be earned. In most cases a person grows up with the belief system that certain professionals can be trusted with no questions asked. Some examples of professional relationships that include fiduciary duty are teacher/student, therapist/patient, and clergy/parishioner. Each of these professionals is held to a higher standard than the "average" professional. Most of these professionals are listed in individual state fiduciary duty laws but in only 17 states is clergy acknowledged as having a fiduciary duty to their parishioners. The titles that go along with these professions tie directly into the power differential, "Professor", "Doctor", and "Father". Catholic laypersons call their priest "Father" for a very specific reason. Cradle Catholics are taught their priest is the closest thing to God our "Father" here on earth. "Father" is the superior, the protector and provider; automatic trust goes hand in hand with those positive characteristics and with the title of "Father".

The most damaging myth is the belief that the sexual relationship between clergy and parishioner is a consensual affair. The reality is the sexual relationship is a sexual assault. No matter if it happened once or if the sexual relationship lasts for 30 years. A sexual relationship between clergy and parishioner can never be consensual. The power differential is too great. As with all victims of sexual assault, the parishioner victim takes on the responsibility of the assault. Thinking they must be the "cause" of this "holy man of God" falling from grace and going against his vow

of celibacy or, in other denominations, the vows he took with his wife. That feeling of responsibility topped off with guilt keeps many adult victims silent. Often the woman is married with a family and is scared her husband will not understand. More often than not these relationships have devastating effects on marriages and the majority end in divorce. In any relationship where a spouse is affected by a sexual assault, the marriage or relationship is stressed but when you add clergy into the mix, the dynamics are extremely skewed. In any other traumatic event in a person's life, one turns to the church for support but in this situation the church is the last place the victim wants to go for support. Therefore, both spouses feel they have nowhere to turn and do not know where to focus their anger so it usually falls upon each other. Marriage counseling is vital in these situations and the sooner therapy starts the better chance the family has at staying intact.

Another myth of the sexual assault by clergy upon parishioner is that the assault is about sex. The assault has nothing to do with sex but has everything to do with power and control. A predator in the clergy profession is no different than any other sexual predator. The rape, the molestation, the incest is about the ultimate power and control the predator can have over his victim. The majority of sexual predators are cut from the same mould. They are charismatic, charming, narcissistic, and compliable. In most cases the initial sexual contact may even seem insignificant and there is no fear felt within the victim. Many times sexually assaults are occurring and the victim doesn't even realize it. The predator is just "testing the waters". His moves get bolder and bolder and the sexual assaults increase. As the assaults become more sexual, the power and control over the victim increases. By the time the victim realizes what is going on, the feeling of responsibility and guilt is so overwhelming she doesn't know what to do and many times does nothing. Often the victim doesn't even realize it was abuse until after she is out of the situation, very much like a domestic violence situation. Many times it takes someone else stepping in and saying 'this isn't a healthy situation', or a traumatic event must occur in order for the victim to realize that the situation is not safe. In some situations the dependence the victim has on the clergy is so great that even though she knows what he is doing to her is wrong, she does not want the relationship to end. So much is invested into these relationships: time, money, energy, emotion and your entire faith base; to many victims, their faith is their entire life. Turning the clergy person in is throwing all

of these investments away. The predator chooses his victim wisely because he knows how his crime will affect his victim. Usually the victim is at a vulnerable time in her life, whether seeking counseling from the clergy for loss of a loved one, or a failing marriage, or past sexual abuse. The predator knows the vulnerability, knows how to use the vulnerability against the victim and ultimately abuses his position of power and trust, pushing his power and control as far as he can take it before he gets caught. It is important to remember that vulnerability is not a negative human characteristic but just a human characteristic. Being human makes vulnerability a reality, making us all vulnerable at one time or another in our life. The problem within these professional relationships is not our human vulnerability, but the predator preying upon that vulnerability.

The "dirty old man" is another myth regarding sexual abuse in general but important to acknowledge when discussing clergy sexual abuse because the predator is the "every man/woman". The sexual predator is the clergy, the teacher, the doctor, the therapist, the police officer and even the friend or neighbour. But it is in these professions where there is a fiduciary duty that the power differential is so great the abuse can occur so easily. People go to these professionals because they need help or some kind of service, so the person relies on that professional. The predator gets to know his victim extremely well. This is known as the 'grooming process'. The period of time in which an even stronger bond can be established with the victim. Which brings me to another important point, the sexual predator plans the crime ahead of time. The grooming process is the first element in the predator's well thought out plan. During this time the victim becomes dependant on the predator and it is not uncommon for the victim to begin to love the predator. The predator plays on the victim's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Today it is harder than ever to distinguish the 'good guys' from the 'bad guys'. A good rule of thumb, if you feel uncomfortable your boundaries are probably being crossed and you must take action to get that uncomfortableness out of your life before it explodes into something unimaginable. If that means changing doctors or going to a different church or ending "friendships" do whatever it takes to make sure your boundaries are not being crossed, the alternative can be life threatening.

The woman must be a seductress is another myth believed in cases of adult clergy abuse. Women struggle with this learned myth that if this "holy man of God" went astray then she must have done something in order for this to happen. Recently a woman told me she heard a priest say to a group of teenagers, "Girls, while giving your boyfriend a hug goodbye, if you rub his back and that causes him to get an erection, you have just brought him to the occasion of sin." This statement is a prime example of this myth being taught and if we are "good" Catholic girls, we internalize this belief that if the man "falls", you are the cause of his failure. If we are really good Catholics and we hear this enough we will bring this myth with us into adulthood and it becomes a part of us as women. This myth is so damaging on so many levels. First, women must realize that they did not seduce the priest but that he manipulated them and abused his position of power. He was the person in authority, not the woman. He was the one that went to seminary and had ethics classes and boundaries classes that taught exactly what is appropriate and what isn't appropriate behaviour with parishioners. If the woman had never been taught what appropriate boundaries are with clergy, she may not realize he is crossing boundaries. What is appropriate with a family member or friend may not be appropriate with clergy, like a kiss or holding hands. Secondly, women must stop thinking of their abuser as clergy and a "man of God" but as a man who is a sexual predator. When the predator was manipulating and abusing he was not acting like clergy; therefore, she should not think of him as clergy. When clergy has sex with a woman and then calls her a "whore" and the "cause of all his problems", that is not being a man of God. That is a manipulating sexual predator who is turning the guilt to his victim and away from himself. In many cases the verbal manipulation is not that extreme but it is always there, turning the responsibility over to the woman resulting in the woman feeling dirty and like a seductress. This behaviour is very common in sexual abuse situations, the predator turning the blame to the victim so the victim will feel guilty and in turn stay silent. Women must remember they did nothing wrong. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being a woman. Be proud and embrace your feminine qualities, love the qualities and most importantly love yourself. Do things that make you feel good. Do things that bring joy in your life. Pampering yourself and treating yourself with the love and respect you deserve is the first step in getting your life back on track.

Another myth is that women are attracted to the "forbidden". The reality is women are attracted to holiness. Women are caregivers and nurturers. Women are attracted to people who seemingly have the same characteristics. Clergy are also supposed to be caregivers and nurturers. Women are drawn to those who are kind and loving, a girlfriend, a doctor, a therapist, a teacher, their husbands, and their children. Seminarians are told they can have any woman and that women will chase them. It is a lie unless the seminarian is a predator. The predators can take their pick of the vulnerable, they are masters at picking out their prey. They use their smooth, calculating, manipulative ways and the victim is putty in their hands. Clergy predators are such incredible manipulators they have their congregants believing they are holy, trustworthy, righteous, upstanding, chosen men of God. When in reality everything they do and say is an act, all part of their plan to abuse. They have a Jekyll and Hyde personality. How many times have we heard, "But he is such a good priest."? They are "good" priests in the public eye; that is how they can get away with what they do. No one will suspect, no one will accuse, no one will believe. The trust does not have to be earned like with a neighbour, co-worker, or friend. The trust is already established because these men are "chosen" men of God. As soon as the manipulation starts the boundaries begin to be crossed. Usually so subtly that the victim doesn't even realize what is happening. Many times it is only after the relationship has ended that the woman realizes the sexual relationship was really sexual abuse.

The seductress myth along with the 'affair myth' are two of the most damaging to the victim. A strong support system is vital in order for the victim to overcome these learned myths and take back control of her life. A support system can include therapist, support groups, family, friends, other victims and spouses. Spouses especially must be loving, supportive, and patient with their partner. Many marriages affected by sexual assault end in divorce but that does not have to be the norm if these two myths can be obliterated. The sexual assault was not only a violation against the body but a violation against the soul. Victims who are abused by clergy are changed for life. The abuse by clergy doesn't have to be a violent rape to traumatize. A kiss, groping, tight hugs, seemingly "small" assaults can cause traumatic results when perpetrated by clergy. For Catholic victims, their faith in the Catholic Church is not just a religion but it is a way of life. Catholicism affects every

aspect of life - finances, time, sex life, school, work, etc. ... It is extremely difficult for the victim after the assault knowing that everything in her life will be affected and ultimately be changed forever. Therefore, spousal support is key to the victim's survival and healing. It is important that the spouse continually give reassurance to his loved one that it was not an affair and that she did nothing wrong. Singles must also build a strong support system. Whether married or single, contact the local sexual assault centre and ask who they recommend for a therapist. A good therapist is vital in the healing journey. After a few sessions with the therapist it should be evident if she is a good fit or not. Sometimes it takes a few tries before finding just the right therapist. A strong support system is a necessity because in the initial stages of healing a victim does not even trust herself. Victims need to be continually reminded that they are good, loving and trustworthy.

Some therapists compare the clergy/parishioner sexual abuse relationship to domestic violence situations. The woman does not feel safe, she knows the situation is not healthy but she does not have the power to break away because of the dependency she has on her perpetrator. This dependency is usually an emotional dependency - time, energy, validation and love, all the things that in an ideal world she would be strong enough to give to herself. But life being what it is, a rollercoaster of ups and downs, she is "depending" on someone else to give her what she emotionally needs and the clergy predator is always ready and waiting to pounce on easy, vulnerable opportunities.

This type of abuse is very much related to Stockholm Syndrome. An infamous victim of Stockholm Syndrome was Patty Hearst. After being with her abductors for two months, she began to actively take part in their robbery scheme. She was convicted and sent to prison but after a period of time and much educating, the public accepted that Stockholm Syndrome was very real and that in fact a victim could evolve into a protector of their abuser. Educating the public of this fascinating yet debilitating syndrome resulted in Bill Clinton pardoning Hearst and ultimately giving her a portion of justice. Stockholm Syndrome is common in battered persons, rape, childhood sexual abuse and even in adult clergy sexual abuse situations. The victim is totally debilitated while feeling sympathy for her assailant

and as a result does not have the power to fight back or end the relationship or even say "No!"

In order to dispel these myths regarding adult clergy sexual abuse we must continue to keep this topic in the public eye. The extreme ramifications this type of abuse are unknown to the general public. Education is key to discrediting these myths and changing attitudes which in turn will result in justice for adult victims of clergy sexual abuse. Clergy sexual predators are no different than any other sexual predator. They lie, cheat, take advantage of the vulnerable, abuse their position of power and ultimately assault and rape the soul. At one time there was an ideology, an attitude, a belief, a myth that a woman could not be raped by her husband. Now after much educating and hard work by courageous wives, that ridiculous belief has been obliterated. Adult victims of clergy abuse must be willing to do the educating and the same hard work to wipe out these outdated beliefs pertaining to adult clergy sexual abuse and put an end to these myths once and for all.

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