

A Theological Perspective for Clerical Sexual Abuse

Dispelling Myths: Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse

At the heart of the Good news is that there is a God who cares about us, who protects and leads us. That God is called the Good Shepherd, as Jesus is. It is a relational image where the sheep are known and called by name.

Ordination is seen as a calling. The calling involves building up the body of Christ, to be the Good shepherd. So the person is expected to be relating to the parishioners as a person who has been ordained, to lead them forward for the sake of the sheep, not for the sake of the shepherd.

This relationship is expected to assist people to hear the voice within themselves, where the 'Kingdom of God' resides. Obviously the Shepherding minister has heard their own call, so he or she knows how to listen to the voice within; which leads, blesses and guides through, even the shadow of death. So Ordination is a sign that this person can lead in the shepherding wisdom and tradition.

The Kingdom of God is within us. We are fed through the Eucharist and the scripture but most importantly, by learning to listen to the voice of God within; to lead us and guide us. This is the true relationship we are being offered and it is open to every man and woman.

It is a gift that is ours-it is not earned, not ours by good deeds but just ours because we are graced with a relationship with the Divine; in all the ups and downs of our life, this never wavers.

So what happens when a minister crosses the boundary line and sexualizes the pastoral relationship? Sexual love entails the feelings and hormones which create

deep bonding; create a “coupling” of two people. This coupling is deep enough for our given natures to protect children or outcomes of the relationship. Society sanctions marriage and signs that the ‘coupling’ is socially acceptable and a core understanding of a stable society.

So when a leader sexualizes a relationship, the joy and bonding that comes about cannot be recognized, it is hidden so the victims deepest and natural feelings for bonding are being distorted and seen as shameful. They are not able to be socially sanctioned as part of the fabric of society.

Sexual feelings may arise for both parties but it is a provable fact that the person with power makes the first approach. It is easy to do when a person has the spiritual power of the shepherd and the time spent together can also become ‘grooming’ for a sexual encounter. The parishioner is likely quite unaware that their physical and emotional boundaries are being worn down. It is for the pastoral person to be self-aware enough that this does not happen.

For it is the minister’s voice that is heard, time and time again. A person listens with their heart and imagination and so the impact is often deeper than realized by the person speaking.

The bonding that occurs is called the ‘pastoral tie’. The words and imagery lie deep in the Christian tradition. It is an exclusive tie, often just to one shepherd who has charge of the flock or it can be a multiple tie - but always, the aim of the connection, is to Jesus and to God.

If the Church forgets its pastoral calling; it can all too easily become a game of power and status. Patterns of control and manipulation become the norm. Yet the power to gossip and demean the other belongs, to the person with the most power; for power so often has the right to speak and not the ones at the bottom, the powerless and the victim in most cases.

A bad Shepherd will do everything to destroy the ‘other’ if outed or if the ‘other’ begins to wake up to what has happened and what should have happened. The pastoral tie is destroyed, often in its fullest sense i.e. the relationship with God and

Jesus; because an affected person may be too scared and confused to listen with the depth required to plant the appropriate seed in their own heart; a deep and sacred trust has been broken.

The world calls people with a professional power to recognise their 'fiduciary duty'- their duty of care and this is never as crucial as it is for Christian ministers. Christian trust and ability to grow is destroyed by clerical abuse and can often destroy a person's primary 'coupling' to a spouse, So chaos exists for the victim, as a loss of security has a major impact on the victim's life with a breakdown of marriage. The Christian minister, who has gained the coupling rights by deceit, has destroyed another's life but it seldom destroys theirs

"Feed my sheep" says Jesus. Jesus got angry at the exploitation at the temple where people should be going for prayer and a building up of this very grounding of their lives. There were many social ills of Jesus's day which he did not appear to get angry about. Sexualisation of the pastoral relationship is another exploitation.

We are raised with the images of the Good Shepherd and yet gloss over the images of the bad shepherd. Biblically they are pointed out quite clearly, sometimes with the understanding of being 'hypocrites'. We are told to beware of the wolf in sheep's clothing i.e. what is shown on the outside, is very different to what is happening within. The sexualisation of pastoral relationships happens when one is acting in this way, hiding behind the mask of piety and the mask of the Church; the 'other' does not see sexualisation coming until they are enmeshed.

It is always beholden of the called and the ordained, to act in regard for the pastoral calling of the Church, anything less is a nightmare for all concerned. The pastoral calling of the Church needs to take precedence over all other understandings of the Church. When the Church fails to be offended at Clergy sexual abuse, it has failed in its own calling.