

VICTIMS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE BY PRIESTS

When an individual is victimized by a priest, they are not only harmed physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well. Bland (2002) illustrated that when an individual was sexually abused by a priest they displayed greater symptoms of grief, anger, a sense of meaninglessness, feelings that God had treated them unfairly, dissociation, depression, sexual problems, sleep disturbances, higher scores on the sexual abuse trauma index and higher scores on the trauma symptom checklist. Fater and Mullaney (2000) conducted a phenomenological study of seven adult male survivors of clergy abuse. The survivors experienced a bifurcated rage (self directed and outwardly directed) and spiritual distress that pervaded every aspect of their life. McLaughlin (1994) found that those abused by clergy distanced themselves from the church in order to avoid re-victimization. While it was clearly illustrated that clerical sexual abuse affected church attendance and participation, the results are inconclusive pertaining to the affect on the victim's relationship with God. These findings are also consistent with those of Rossetti (1995), who further found that female victims of sexual abuse displayed a decline in their trust of God, but the male victims did not.

The parish also experiences the ramifications of the abuse. Rossetti (1997) divided his sample into three groups: those who had no awareness of charges of sexual abuse within their parish, those who were aware that a priest in their diocese had been accused and those whose own parish priest had

been charged. The results illustrated that while trust in the priesthood and church declined across the three groups, trust in God remained consistent. The study also illustrated that parishioners were more likely to distrust the Church's handling of sexual misconduct and less likely to accept Church doctrine on sexuality and morals. Rossetti concluded that North American Catholics viewed new priests in the parish with suspicion, were less willing to allow offending priests back into the parish and are less likely to believe that the modern Church is better than the Church in the past. In evaluating the effects of the sexual abuse cases in Newfoundland, Nason-Clark (1998), interviewed 24 Roman Catholic women to assess their reaction to the scandal. Each woman in the sample could remember where she was when she first heard about the story, and all recall having initially reacted to the news with disbelief and, later, with anger (19 out of the 24 participants). The anger was targeted at the offending priests, bishop, other Catholic priests, and the Church hierarchy while some were angry with the Catholics who lived in the parish where the priests were charged. They also experienced a sense of betrayal and guilt that caused them to alter their relationship with the Church. Four years after the initial interview, the author conducted a follow-up study and found that some women had made their way back to the Church while others had decided to stay away. Participants believed that the Church in Newfoundland had not recovered from the scandal, and that they will never regard priests in the same manner again.