

## Review of *Spotlight*

Sister Lydia Allen, RSM, Ph.D.

The movie, *Spotlight*, shows how an investigative team from the Boston Globe opened the deep wound of child sexual abuse which festered beneath the surface of the Catholic Church and culture of Boston in 2002. By the end of the movie, the team successfully exposed the extent of the abuse, as well as the institutional policy of denial and concealing of the problem by Archdiocesan authorities. It is difficult to watch how Church and judicial authorities consistently minimized the heinousness of the abuse and how they, through moving abusing priests from parish to parish, knowingly or unknowingly participated in allowing the abuse to continue. Psychological denial has serious consequences, as it denies the truth of things.

Closed social systems, such as was the Archdiocese of Boston during the period of time described in the movie, are usually tightly bound by unspoken rules and do not allow for outside input or correction. Such systems are unhealthy and can be dangerous because self-correction is extremely difficult, if not impossible. It may lead to a "systemic disease," as seems to have been the case in Boston. Interestingly, the necessary corrective came about for the Boston Globe when its newly imported editor, Marty Baron (played by Liev Schreiber), chose to focus on the issue of child sexual abuse by priests and potential Catholic institutional involvement in the abuse; likewise, the *Spotlight* team, along with an independent lawyer, provided the outside corrective necessary to break through the institutional pall of silence and the institutional denial or minimization of the significance of the problem. It is ironic that we often fight the very interventions from outside which, painful though they be, will help us to grow, heal and become free members of community.

Prior to and at the time of the Boston abuse crisis, psychological assessment and formation of candidates to the priesthood were minimal, in comparison to today's standards. Likewise, most psychologists and psychiatrists falsely believed that paedophilia was curable, since professionals did not yet have deeper understanding of the multiple psychological, emotional and spiritual dynamics which play a role in determining how "treatable" a child sexual abuser may be. Thus, unfortunately and in relative ignorance, treatment centres often declared child sexual abusers "cured" after treatment and recommended reinstatement to pastoral activity to Church authorities. This is no excuse, but an explanation, as to why some of the abuse was allowed to continue. One may surely wonder why no-one saw that something wasn't working.

Any victim of child sexual abuse suffers and the fact that abuse continued to reoccur must have been agonizing to involved families and victims alike. The ex-priest, Richard Sipe, whose statistics regarding child sexual abuse are questionable, voiced his theory that child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is largely brought about by the demands of living priestly celibacy. According to him, 6% of all priests act out sexually with children and only 50% of priests live celibately. His research results are not shared by other researchers and practitioners. For example, some estimate that approximately 4 percent of priests in the Catholic Church have sexually abused children, stating that this statistic is comparable with those of other religious groups.<sup>1</sup> Still others estimate even lower

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1. 1 Thomas Plante: OpEd: "A Perspective on Clergy Sexual Abuse," *San Jose Mercury News*, March 24, 2002 (updated online version)

levels of abuse in the Church and suggest that the statistical number of child sexual abuse cases in general (in families, for example) is much higher. Furthermore, Sipe states that his estimation that only 50% of priests are living celibately is based on his own studies and this would need to be validated by others, in order to be considered to be truly representative.

The Catholic Church has learned many things from the child abuse cases in Boston and from similar mistakes and poor choices made in other Diocese around the world. It is now evident that the Catholic Church will not tolerate child molesters or abusers, although more will always need to be done to enforce this fact. Victims of child sexual abuse must also be heard, their dignity regarded with reverence and they must receive help toward healing. Internal and external safety measures are also in place to assure that allegations of child abuse will be responded to quickly and professionally. In Australia, Cardinal Pell began the Melbourne Response and the Towards Healing process, which was further established by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference; this program was not perfect, but victims are now widely encouraged to make themselves known and to be heard by Church authorities.

Then, in 2012, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was founded. At the same time, Church authorities also invites civil authorities to complete their criminal investigations before making any judgment regarding future plans for priest abusers. And the Sydney Archdiocese further promotes the safety of children through an office entitled Safeguarding and Ministerial Integrity; this assures that priests, deacons and seminarians are observing proper boundaries with children.

In the field of psychology, we have also come much further in recognizing the complexity involved in cases of child sexual abuse. Not all child sexual abusers are the same. For example, the differentiation between ephebophiles (whose victims are in mid-to-late adolescence) and paedophiles (who have a primary or exclusive sexual attraction to children who are pre-pubescent) has been recognized, as has a further clarification regarding those who are fixated or regressed. There are also homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual orientations of perpetrators.

Finally, there are also significant issues associated with personality and character development and formation, as well as of the affective maturity of child sexual abusers. These, too, need to be evaluated. Such differentiations are essential for the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of child sexual abusers, as well as for making a prognosis and recommendations to Church authorities.

Over the past ten or twenty years, a great deal has also been done to strengthen our assessment procedures and formation programs in seminaries. Of course, more can be done in this regard. There is no sure method of knowing through psychological testing whether a seminarian, deacon or priest is a potential child sexual abuser. However, comprehensive psychological evaluation and long-term observation are both important means of finding potential red flags. Extensive formation in healthy psychosexual, emotional and social development, as well as living in mature and chaste

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2. *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 52, No. 5, May 2004 ( C ° 2004) "The Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Roman Catholic Church: What Psychologists and Counselors Should Know", Thomas G. Plante, 1;2;3 and Courtney Daniels1 Springer Publishing, 2004  
<http://www.scu.edu/cas/psychology/faculty/upload/Plante-Clergy-Paper-2.pdf>

male-male and male-female relationships with peers is also essential for the healthy living of priests and priest-candidates. Similarly, the learning and exercising of such virtues as honesty, accountability and justice, temperance and chastity, fortitude and prudence are essential for those who desire to be integral priests of the Church. We are a Church of the Cross, where justice and mercy meet in the Heart of Christ. It is there where healing for each individual and for the human institution of the Church as a whole will occur.