

## Effects on Boys of Priest Abuse

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I write this in early September, 2002, in New York City, where I live and work. As people ponder the first anniversary of September 11th, ideas about the nature of trauma abound in the media, in private discourse, and in my consulting room.

It is futile and divisive to think about whether trauma from an attack on a city (and country) is “better” or “worse” than that from childhood sexual victimization. Nevertheless, it is instructive to reflect on what helped people start their lives again after September 11th, and to consider the disparity between their recovery arc and that of people trying to salvage their lives after childhood sexual abuse.

In general, the survivors of the September 11th attacks and the families of those who died were understood to be grieving, needing to talk about their losses and shocks. By and large, they were tended to as much as possible by dedicated professionals as well as by their personal extended networks.

By contrast, sexual abuse victims are often not noticed as having had out-of-the-ordinary experiences. Symptoms they suffer are often encoded by observers as signs

that a child is difficult, moody, or a behavior problem. Many children never tell anyone about their abuse till long after they are adults, if ever. Their abuser may have warned them of dire consequences should they talk about what happened to them, or they may be so filled with shame that they cannot find words to express themselves or a trusted ally in whom to confide. By and large, their experience is a lonely one, especially since abusers often choose victims they know to be already isolated for one reason or another.

Another contrast is that September 11th victims were traumatized by enemies. Sexual abuse victims are often traumatized by people they believe to be friends, guardians, trusted caretakers of one sort or another. Often predators are from their own families, or are in such close relationships with the child that the abuse feels like incest. While incest literally refers to sexual behavior between family members, it can be construed in a larger sense as any “violation of a position of power, trust, and protection” (Lew, 1988, p. 16). By this broad definition, any older caretaker who sexually betrays a child is committing a kind of incest. For the child, the result may be nearly the same as betrayal by a parent: a shattering of the natural trust he has in the adults who care for him.

In this context, consider the effect on children of abuse by priests. Priests certainly have no monopoly on being sexual predators. In addition to family members of all kinds, I have known sexual victims who were abused by teachers, coaches, scoutmasters, babysitters, neighbors, and doctors, not to mention non-Catholic clergy.

Yet there are some specific meanings for victims in having been abused by priests. There is a concerted effort, usually a benign one, to make Catholic clergy part of a parishioner's "family." Catholic children are told to call clergy Father, Mother, Sister, Brother. Children, of course, are often quite literal in their understanding of adult instructions. How are they to understand it when their Father, Mother, Sister, or Brother makes sexual overtures to them?

Psychologically, then, victims of priests deal with incest. With this in mind, consider the cases of men who were sexually abused as boys by priests.

I have elsewhere (Gartner, 1999) discussed two such men, both of whom are still in treatment. The circumstances of their abuse were quite different: Julian was abused by a priest/mentor from ages twelve till fifteen. Lorenzo had been abused by a number of men before a sexual encounter with a priest at age fifteen. I will describe what priest abuse meant to them, and then relate how they have reacted to the deepening Church scandals.

Julian and Lorenzo grew up more similar to than different from other men with boyhood sexual abuse histories. They both became sexually compulsive, and had vast reserves of rage and problems with older authorities. Like many sexually abused men, they had problematic intimate relationships. Lorenzo, a gay man, had never had a relationship of any depth. Julian, a straight man, was married, but found ongoing intimacy with his wife nearly impossible to achieve.

But, poignantly, both Julian and Lorenzo had crises of faith superimposed on the

more usual damaging sequelae of childhood sexual abuse. Witness Lorenzo:

By the time he was fifteen, Lorenzo had had numerous exploitative sexual encounters in which he sexually serviced older boys and men, all of whom were publicly identified as heterosexual, and many of whom were married. Confused about the meaning of his own behavior, and only vaguely knowledgeable about sexual orientation, he did nevertheless begin to wonder if he were gay. He had no idea who to talk to about this in the working-class mill town in which he grew up. One of ten children in a lower middle class Catholic home where physical abuse was rampant, he knew better than to discuss gay sex at home, but he began to feel desperate about his sexual feelings. Then he remembered a priest who had once served in his town for two years before being transferred to a large city three hundred miles away. He'd always thought this priest was "cool," and so he called him and said he needed to talk to him. The priest came to Lorenzo's town for a visit, and Lorenzo first told him about his abuse experiences and then said he thought he was gay.

"He looked at me and said, 'I knew you were gay the minute I laid eyes on you!' I said, 'Why didn't you tell me?' and he said, 'Some things are better to discover on your own.' So, at first he was good about it -- he invited me to visit him, and when I did he took me around the city and showed me gay neighborhoods, gay bars, gay shops. That part was good, but then we went back to the house he lived in with other priests, and I wanted to get high -- I was a crazy kid in those days, and I asked him where to get grass. He said, 'No problem, just go upstairs and ask Father Donald.' So I went

upstairs, and there was nice Father Donald, and we got high together, and then he made a pass at me.” Lorenzo laughed. “It was the first time anyone serviced *me*, and I really liked it. When I went downstairs and told the first priest about it, he said, ‘Oh, sure, Father Donald does that with everyone.’ Can you believe this? He *knew* what was going to happen when he sent me up there! Later, I found out he was gay too, and had sex with other boys, though never with me.”

Lorenzo was talking faster and faster, and I asked him to slow down and tell me what he felt about all this. “I thought it was funny. And exciting.” Then he paused. “But, you know, I’m thirty-five now, about the age Father Donald was then. I have no interest in fifteen-year-olds! My nephews are that age! I’d never go near them for sex.” I asked again how he felt about what happened with the two priests. For the first time, he seemed reflective. “It was a terrible thing to do. They knew how fucked up I was about sex with all those men, and how unsure I was about being gay. I went to them for sanctuary! And they just helped me party with them.” Lorenzo began to look sad. “In those days I really believed in the Catholic Church. No more.”

If a child is abused by a priest, he may not only have a crisis of faith. He may literally feel that he is betraying God. He knows that his abuser has taken a vow of chastity, and even though he may know he never desired the priest sexually, he may still feel that he somehow instigated things and tempted the priest to break those vows. This is particularly likely if his abuser tells him that they are engaging in sexual behavior because the boy is so special or beautiful. Whatever the adult’s intent in saying such a

thing, the boy may well conclude that the abuse was his own fault.

As a man discerns that he was exploited by someone he considered a direct link to God, his whole spiritual world may begin to crumble. Boys who are most easily preyed upon by priests are likely to come from families with deep religious convictions. They may be altar boys or choir boys, and in any case they are likely to feel engaged in their religious lives and to have idealized views of their spiritual mentors. In addition, they may come from troubled families and be looking for parental figures in the Church to act as role models and provide the structure that they lack:

Julian was deeply ambivalent about the man who simultaneously mentored, loved, and abused him. He was abused for three years by Father Scott, a parish priest who when Julian was twelve required that he come for special counseling sessions in order to get confirmed. Father Scott made Julian his special altar boy, invited him to visit him in his rooms, and undertook to educate him in classical texts, languages, and music. Julian came from a psychologically and physically invasive large family in which emotions and boundaries were ignored. Although he flunked out of school after Father Scott began to abuse him, once the abuse stopped he became an A student, largely, he believes, because of the earlier influence of the priest. He entered seminary himself, but fell apart after two years and dropped out. He eventually went on to get an advanced degree in another field.

Father Scott taught Julian to idealize the male relationships described in ancient Greek texts. These included intellectual mentoring, deep commitment and interpersonal

intimacy, and also physical sexuality, which began a few months after Father Scott started counseling Julian. Father Scott led up to the initial seduction by encouraging Julian to talk about the pain he felt about his physically abusive but otherwise unresponsive family. After these sessions, Father Scott would hug Julian. These hugs were precious to the boy, who was starved for physical affection, or, indeed, any kind of positive regard from an adult.

With time, the hugs got longer, and then one day Father Scott kissed Julian, putting his tongue in the boy's mouth and making the kiss last for minutes. Julian was startled and confused, unsure of what was happening and what it meant. After the kiss, Father Scott said, "I know you want more, but that's all for now." Julian was bewildered at the time, but as an adult he said, "So right from the beginning he made it that the abuse was my idea, so I felt guilty that it was happening even though I had no concept of men kissing at the time, and certainly no interest in it." Shortly thereafter, Father Scott introduced Julian to anal sex, and for two years they had regular sexual encounters that included anal sex and mutual masturbation.

Father Scott said their relationship existed on the highest plane possible for two human beings, that they had attained the ideal glorified by the greatest poets of the ancient world. He reiterated that they experienced all forms of love together: love of beauty, love of thought, love of logic, love of art, and love of one another that was intellectual, sensual, and emotional. Julian did love Father Scott, and he craved the companionship and deep interest the priest offered him. Nevertheless, he was

confused and conflicted about the sex that accompanied it. “He did so much for me! Anyone would think he was the best mentor a boy could ever have, and, except for the sex, he was.”

Julian put a stop to the sex at age fifteen. After he left for college, his family moved away from the diocese where Father Scott served, and Julian rarely returned to his old neighborhood. He excelled in school and married, but remained ashamed, conflicted, and secretive about his relationship with the priest. He remained grateful for the intellectual and emotional expansion the relationship with Father Scott afforded him. Simultaneously, however, he was covertly furious about the exploitation and mystification involved in their sexual activity. As an adult, he was a compulsive masturbator driven to furtively view peep shows and consumed by female pornography when he was anxious. He felt out of control, in the grip of the sexual impulses that flooded him at these times.

In their treatments, both Julian and Lorenzo became increasingly aware of the extent of their rage at their priest-abusers. But they also became sadly aware of how much they still hoped for from these inadequate men:

Lorenzo called the priest who sent him to be abused and found him receptive to the call until he realized that Lorenzo wanted to talk to him about how much he had been hurt by his boyhood abuse. The priest then abruptly got off the phone. He never returned further phone calls. Nor did he respond to a letter telling him that Lorenzo was not interested in hurting him, just in coming to some understanding of what had

happened.

At age thirty, Julian attended a funeral in his old neighborhood, and there saw Father Scott, who came over and introduced himself to Julian's wife. Julian felt furious but paralyzed, wanting to shame and hurt Father Scott but barely able to speak to him. The priest drew him into a corner and whispered, "You may feel better than the rest of us now that you've left town, but you and I know that all I have to do is rub your belly and you'll squeal like a puppy!" Feeling helpless and shamed once again, Julian finally got in touch with the full extent of his rage at his former mentor. Yet he was never able to confront him, and maintained a fantasy of reconciling with Father Scott. When the priest died suddenly a few years later, Julian attended his funeral. There, a number of people offered their condolences to him as Father Scott's former protege. He was told that Father Scott had often praised Julian and had been very proud of him. While in some ways it was gratifying to hear this, Julian also experienced inchoate rage. When he found out that he had been left a small sum of money in Father Scott's will, he experienced the bequest as a way of buying him off, even making him a prostitute. At that point he talked to another priest who he knew had been also abused by Father Scott, and who was the executor of the priest's estate. He did get some corroboration from this man of Father Scott's predatory nature, but he remained deeply conflicted about Father Scott and the effect of their relationship on him.

When the Church scandal broke in 2002, both Julian and Lorenzo experienced a liberating sense of having their experience validated. They were very glad that the

Church was being forced to acknowledge the extent of priest abuse. At the same time, though, they felt a recurrence of shame about their own experiences. They were constantly triggered by news reports about the Church. Lorenzo said that to keep from being overwhelmed by anxiety he had to tightly monitor what he allowed himself to read in the media. And Julian noted sadly that he is a religious man without a church: "I went to seminary because Catholicism means something to me. But now I can't go into a church without feeling I will vomit. My wife says, 'Let's go to an Episcopal Church -- it's almost the same!' But it's not the same. I'm not an Episcopalian, I'm a Catholic. And there's no where I can go to be one."

## References

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