

THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS IN THE  
CATHOLIC CHURCH – CONSULTATION

Topic: Interactive Discernment Session  
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 Presenters: Megan K. McCabe, Gonzaga University  
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For the fourth and final meeting of this consultation, the committee held a synodal-style conversation to discuss how we could ensure that the sex abuse crisis would continue to have a substantive impact on the exercise of theology, both intellectually and institutionally. The session began with brief analyses of Robert Orsi’s “What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?”, offered by Daniel Horan, and Tina Beattie’s “Theological (De)Formations? The Sex Abuse Crisis in the Context of Nuptial Ecclesiology and the Theology of Priesthood,” offered by Megan McCabe. The articles call in different ways for an expansion of theological reflection beyond the usual topics of ordination, clericalism, and sexual ethics. It continued with an *examen* of our scholarship and teaching followed by synodal-style discussion of concerns and hopes. About fifteen members attended.

Themes that arose frequently in our initial discussions included sexual abuse as primarily an abuse of power, which we must confront and to which we must respond more effectively. And, sexual abuse continues to demand secret-keeping.

Attendees suggested several concrete strategies, some institutional and some individual. Their intent is to routinize the issue in theology and in church life, just as theologians have routinized (for example) the preferential option for the poor and are attempting to routinize a stance against white racism. The suggested strategies are bulleted below. The consultation will communicate directly with CTSA leadership about the items suggested for its attention.

- At the level of individual teaching and scholarship, normalize the conversation in these ways:
  - Refuse secret-keeping, and explore with students the questions “Why do we skirt and avoid this issue?” and “How can we make abuse part of our ordinary conversation?”
  - Listen to survivors’ stories, being open to the change they will work in us and in our thinking.
  - Teach courses or segments of courses about sexual abuse; invite survivors to speak.
  - Matter-of-factly tell stories of abuse in our teaching and writing rather than implicitly perpetuating secret-keeping.
  - Honestly address the intersectional factors in victimization.
  - In all peer reviews of books and articles, ask about the theological and moral implications of the work for the sex abuse crisis and/or about what victims’ perspectives might bring to a critique of the work. Also point out any issues with gendered ecclesiology or theologies of sacrament and relationship, as well as uncritical embrace of inequalities of power.

- Examine the spiritual and psychological roots of our reluctance to address sex abuse—shame, for example.
- Take the risk of being personally vulnerable in our teaching and writing generally, and examine the gendered dimensions of our understandings of vulnerability.
- At the level of the Society, institutionalize the question in these ways:
  - At a regular interval (perhaps every 5 years), the board and staff could review and report on the CTSA’s progress on this issue both with regard to policy and practice and with regard to scholarship. They could adapt the *examen* provided for the conference.
  - Invite a survivor to address the society in a plenary.
  - Hold a society-wide discussion of the kind of formation that can foster the virtues necessary to create a community in which addressing sex abuse is routine rather than exceptional.
- Within the US Catholic Church there is an attitude of “Enough, already! Aren’t safe-keeping policies an adequate answer? Can’t we finally move on?” We argue that overcoming a culture of secret-keeping, discomfort with the issue, and focus on perpetrators rather than victims indicates that many tasks remain. Among them, we must make these changes in ecclesial practice, informed by the theological questions above:
  - Review and renew the formation of seminarians, especially with regard to sexuality, abuse, gender, power, and a habit of open discussion of all four. In particular, help seminarians to reflect on the meaning of masculinity and on how to live a healthy, holy life that accepts rather than ignores their sexuality and their need for emotional intimacy and also helps them consciously account for their power over others, even when they themselves do not feel powerful.
  - Listen to survivors and make reparations.
  - Change the church’s culture of clericalism among both clergy and laypeople.
  - Cultivate and normalize parish-level conversations about abuses of power, including sexual abuses.

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