Opinion
News



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A few days ago, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." Since then, some half million people tweeted "Me Too." More than twelve million people posted #MeToo on Facebook.

Sexual assault is no joke.

Sometimes they tell tragic stories. Sometimes they name names. Sometimes they just say #MeToo.

They are women and men, girls and boys. They share the common bonds of anger, hurt, resentment and doubt. How could they be treated like that, like what? Like an object? Like an animal? Like a piece of meat?

Their stories are remarkably similar. The professor, the director, the editor, the priest, the manager — always someone with the power to create or destroy a career or a life — physically or emotionally cornered their prey and, more often than not, pounced. These are the up-close-and-personal harassments and assaults: the off-tune comments; the brushing past and "accidentally" touching private places above or below the waist; the promise of some sort of help in return for "favors."

There is rape, yes, but there are also the subtle line crossings that curdle the soul.

There is the leering and staring, the equally disturbing at-a-distance harassments. The person granted a whistle or a catcall when walking down the street, or the one who is "checked out" coming into a room does not forget it.

Please remember, it's not just women and girls. Men and boys are often targets of entitled strangers (or friends, or acquaintances or superiors) who only know about defined boundaries on maps. These days we hear more about women and girls.

The salacious facts about the latest celebrity that now spread across newspapers underscore the national interest in little more than salacious facts. Today's news is forgotten once it wraps tomorrow's fish. The names paraded across television screens soon drop into a memory hole. Today: Harvey Weinstein. Yesterday: Bill

Cosby, Anthony Weiner, and Jerry Sandusky. Other celebrity scandals have already faded. Who remembers Roman Polanski?

Celebrities aside, there are the 6,721 accused priests and bishops in the United States counted by bishopaccountability.org. The sickness of going after children is mind-boggling, but we know at least some are predators intent on abusing older teenagers. Besides these, the uncounted legion of priests with paramours (male or female) brings abuse to a new level. And, we have no idea of the number of fathers among the fathers; we only know of the few whose children or consciences eventually outed them.

In every case, whether a Weinstein-like aggressor or a priest predator, a powerful person asserts command and control over another person's body. These examples are male, but it is not always or only men. And even if nothing "happens," the aggressors and predators cause wounds that form scars.

If you have never been on the receiving end of the leer or the touch, perhaps you cannot appreciate the confusion and the ways these situations change lives. More often than not no one will or can believe anything happened. "I cannot believe what you are saying" is the ice-knife to the heart that leaves a hole but no evidence.

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Too many people look aside, some not believing, others not wanting to believe. Screenwriter Scott Rosenberg claims everybody knew. Writer-director-actor Quentin Tarantino said he knew about Weinstein all along and should have done something. That is patently ridiculous. Everybody is afraid to say anything, whether it is a Weinstein or a predator priest or a dirty-old-man professor, because whistle-blowing has consequences.

Precisely because too many people look aside, preferring to think that the powerful he (or she) would never do anything like that, the victims remain victims, carrying the memory of the word, the leer, the touch or worse.

The fact of the matter is that no sexual harassment is isolated. Every attack is an attack on the fabric of society, a tear in the web that binds us one to another in the project of life. Every single one of us suffers when one of us is abused and the balance of the community is upset. Everyone suffers. Everyone knows. Still it goes

on.

#MeToo.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. Her books include *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* and *Women Deacons?: Essays with Answers*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, the Vatican's publishing house, has just published her *The Light of the World: Daily Meditations for Advent and Christmas* in Italian.]

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