

A large poster is attached to a van Jan. 19 in Munich, depicting retired Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising, and Archbishop Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne, during a demonstration in protest of the church's handling of sexual abuse. (CNS/KNA/Dieter Mayr)



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Last week two major U.S. Catholic universities hosted conferences that engaged ongoing historical and theological research on clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

The first, a symposium titled "Gender, Sex, and Power: Towards a History of Clergy Sex Abuse in the U.S. Catholic Church," was hosted March 27-29 by the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame.

The second, a conference titled "'Our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us' (Is 59:12a): Re-Imagining Church in Light of Colonization and Catholic Sexual Abuse," took place at Gonzaga University March 31-April 3.

Although I was out of town and could not attend the Notre Dame event, I was an invited participant in the Gonzaga conference, which was sponsored in part by the "Taking Responsibility" project based at Fordham University. The primary working group consisted of approximately 40 scholars from across North America, mostly historians and theologians (including some who had presented at or attended the Notre Dame symposium just a few days earlier). While there were two plenary sessions open to the public, most of these working sessions were closed to the invited participants.

Without disclosing details, I will say that the quality of scholarship, the level of discussion, and the seriousness and sincerity of all the participants was exceptional. The Gonzaga event was especially significant given the particular focus on the intersection of sexual abuse with the history of colonialism and systemic racism in the Catholic Church in the United States, something rarely explored in discussions of clergy abuse and its cover-up.

Yet during the conference I began thinking about the notable lack of ordained scholars involved in the work of engaging the terrible history of sexual abuse in the church, both represented at this specific gathering and more broadly. For example,

of the nine clergy scholars invited to participate, only three of us were able to be present. But it also struck me as telling that very few members of the local Gonzaga Jesuit community came in person to the public lectures on the subject of clergy abuse.

Organizers and participants of the event at Notre Dame also told me that they were aware of only two members of the Congregation of Holy Cross who attended all or part of the symposium, and one was a postdoctoral fellow required to be there. For context, Corby Hall houses more than 60 members of the congregation, and it is just one of four major residences for the community on campus.

This is not the only time that I have seen clergy absenting themselves from engaging in the public or scholarly reckoning with the history and reality of clergy sexual abuse. There are a lot of reasons why clergy may choose not to attend or participate in such events, including schedule conflicts or other legitimate excuses. Still, in other instances, some clergy have even been hostile, defensive or claiming the status of victimhood for the continued investigation into abuse and its cover-up. We have seen this sort of clerical defensiveness over the years, even from Pope Francis, and more recently in some defenses of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in the wake of revelations of his own mishandling of abuse cases while archbishop of Munich.



A woman holds a candle during a rally for victims of clerical sexual abuse, Jan. 21 in front of the cathedral in Essen, Germany. (CNS/KNA/Andre Zelck)

I have been present for conversations in which some members of religious communities and diocesan priests have expressed views that suggest they — the clergy — see themselves, their community or the church in general as the ones "really" under attack. Some even go so far as to decry "unfair" or "negative" inquiry into past cases of abuse or collective responsibility on the part of the communities today. *I didn't do anything wrong! Why do I have to deal with this? How is this my problem?* Conversations with colleagues confirm that I am not the only one who has experienced these kinds of comments.

As I have tried to interrogate why so many of my fellow clerics have absented themselves or engaged in defensive strategies, I found myself reflecting on systemic racism and white privilege as both an analog for clergy sexual abuse and a compounding factor in this horrific phenomenon. In this context, clericalism serves as a parallel to white privilege, just as the systemic injustice of clergy abuse often

parallels systemic racism.

By definition, clericalism — that institutional evil that Pope Francis regularly decries — is a system of privileges, benefits, presumptions of goodwill and entitlements based solely on a person being an ordained minister (or, at times, a non-ordained member of a religious community). It marks some members of the church as "set apart" and, in its most distorted forms, presents clerics as "holier," unable to be questioned, entitled to special treatment and absolute in authority. The very nature of clericalism conspires to prevent those who benefit from it — including its critics like me — from seeing the full range of its impact.

Clericalism also creates a culture of isolation from many hard realities and discomfiting facts. And when many clerics are forcibly confronted with the overwhelmingly painful and disturbing truths of the abuse crisis and its cover-up, what surfaces is defensiveness, dismissiveness, avoidance, and other behaviors and strategies.

Drawing from the work of the scholar and antiracism activist Robin DiAngelo, who in 2011 coined the term "white fragility" to describe the phenomenon of white people's inability "to tolerate racial stress" in a white supremacist and systemically racist society, I believe that the many Catholic clergy today suffer from "clerical fragility."

DiAngelo notes that white Americans live, often unaware, in an insulated environment and this "insulated environment of racial privilege builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress." This is, of course, a symptom and effect of white privilege.

Comparably, because of the insulation and comfort provided by clericalism, priests, bishops and deacons struggle in contexts where they must face the realities of the abuse crisis. We can see how easily even a minimum amount of abuse-related stress becomes, as DiAngelo says, "intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves." She adds: "These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation."

Suddenly, the self-absenting of clergy from conversations about the abuse crisis or defensive and argumentative behavior within such contexts makes a great deal of sense.

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I can relate to the description. On the very same day that I proposed the analogy of "clerical fragility" to my academic colleagues in a discussion, I attended a plenary lecture about the history of clergy abuse in the American Southwest by Kathleen Holscher, associate professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico.

At one point, she put up a list of names of those documented as abusers in the Diocese of Gallup during the 20th century. About 10 of them had "OFM" after their names. I didn't know any of these friars, I didn't recognize any of the names, nor am I from the province that primarily supplied the "missionaries" to the Native American reservations there, but those details didn't and shouldn't matter. Within just a few seconds I felt a roller coaster of emotion, from anger at my historical brothers in Franciscan life to fear of guilt by association to shame for being affiliated with such evil to righteous indignation at the senseless and unspeakable harm perpetrated on such vulnerable populations of people.

Facing these simple, blunt and disturbing historical facts was overwhelming, uncomfortable and even painful. I wish these thousands of cases of abuse and violence did not exist, but pretending that they didn't won't make anything better. As a Franciscan priest complicit in the church's structural sin of clericalism, I know the experience of what I'm calling "clerical fragility." I know the desire to pretend the Dallas Charter solved all the problems, to avoid the topic and reality of abuse, and to absent myself from difficult contexts, just as I know the experience of being socialized as a white cisgender man in the United States conditions me to experience forms of both white and male fragility.

But just as racism is a white problem, sexual abuse in the church is a clergy problem. And just as white people need to name and confront "white fragility," then push through the discomfort we have been socialized to avoid and ignore in a white supremacist society, so too do we priests, bishops and deacons need to name and confront "clerical fragility," then push through the discomfort we have been socialized to avoid and ignore in a church marked by the persistent sin of clericalism.

Only then can we begin to know and speak the truth, work toward justice, and ensure that the reign of God is what governs the actions of the church and its ministers, rather than the abusive deployment of racist, colonial and clerical power.