News



A screenshot displays the website for Fordham's "Taking Responsibility: Jesuit Educational Institutions Confront the Causes and Legacy of Clergy Sexual Abuse" project. A report released Jan. 26 summarizes the findings of 18 research projects to better understand clergy abuse. (NCR/takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu)



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A new report from the Jesuit-run Fordham University on the long-term impacts of clergy sexual abuse criticizes the global Jesuit religious order for placing importance on discretion when handling Catholic priests accused of abuse, instead of on discipline or prevention of further abuse.

The report, released Jan. 26, summarizes the findings of 18 research projects that were part of a yearslong effort to better understand clergy abuse.

The text, which contains several case studies of Jesuit abusers and details a project examining how Jesuit norms have harmed the order's response to abuse, comes as the church continues to reckon with how the Vatican and Jesuit superiors handled abuse allegations against a high-profile religious artist, Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik.

Jesuit norms, says the report on that project, have hampered the order's responses to the abuse crisis. The project is described as involving interviews with 13 Jesuits, "most of whom have held significant leadership positions" in the order.

Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik gives a Lenten meditation from the Clementine Hall at the Vatican in t

Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik gives a Lenten meditation from the Clementine Hall at the Vatican in this March 6, 2020, file photo. Rupnik is under restricted ministry after being accused of abusing adult nuns in Slovenia. (CNS)

"There is an emphasis on being patient and merciful that allows for inferior performance and outright misbehavior," writes C. Colt Anderson, a professor of Christian spirituality at Fordham who was the principal investigator on that project. "As a member of a religious order told us, there is confusion between what is simply sinful and what is criminal."

The Jan. 26 report is the capstone of Fordham's "Taking Responsibility: Jesuit Educational Institutions Confront the Causes and Legacy of Clergy Sexual Abuse" project.

As part of the process for the project, researchers at 10 different Jesuit universities applied for and received sub-grants to study specific aspects of clergy sexual abuse and the responses to it, including moral injury, litigation, intersections with colonization and racism, and the effects of telling survivors' stories. Many of the teams were multidisciplinary.

The final report also includes short, practical guides on topics such as encouraging whistleblowing, communicating about the abuse scandal, and reforming Jesuit rules and norms.

Catherine Osborne, the program coordinator for Taking Responsibility, told NCR that while people at Fordham had been talking about doing a similar project for a long time, events in 2018, such as a grand jury report that accused more than 300 Pennsylvania priests of sexual assault and former cardinal Theodore McCarrick's removal from active ministry after sexual abuse allegations, catalyzed the project and made the funding available.



Then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick arrives for Ash Wednesday Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this Feb. 13, 2013 file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Osborne said that the project's leaders decided "we were not going to try to say anything definitive about the abuse crisis," but instead ask many researchers "to contribute a little bit to a mosaic picture."

"We know through forty years of work on clergy sexual abuse that this isn't just a matter of some particularly bad people — 'a few bad apples' as one of our research projects put it — but there are structural problems," wrote Osborne in an email after a phone interview. "What that means is that clergy sexual abuse is really everybody's problem [for anyone who] is Catholic or works for a Catholic institution."

Osborne said that while people involved in Catholic institutions have different roles to play in terms of preventing abuse, "there's still a level at which we're all part of the same system."

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In terms of Jesuit failings on sexual abuse, Anderson reports that at Jesuit schools and universities Jesuit priests and brothers often face different disciplinary processes than lay faculty and staff. Jesuit supervisors, he writes, have to balance the non-legalistic norms of the order with an institution's rules when supervising another Jesuit.

"Jesuits emphasize the importance of charitable discretion and profess a desire to save people from embarrassment," Anderson writes. "As a result, the theme of people 'disappearing' was a recurring motif."

Fr. Bryan Massingale, a theological ethicist at Fordham, investigated clergy sexual abuse in African American communities. His findings highlighted that, while Black Catholics have experienced sexual abuse, only one diocese in Alexandria, Louisiana, keeps demographic information about survivors of abuse. Massingale wrote, "The true scope of harm suffered by Black persons and other communities of color is unknown and unknowable."



Fr. Bryan Massingale, a theology ethicist at Fordham University in New York City, participates in a 2017 panel discussion in New York. (CNS/ Fordham University/Bruce Gilbert)

Massingale lifts up the need for terms that are more culturally appropriate than "victim" or "survivor," such as "coper" to emphasize how Black people cope after abuse. He also highlights the race-specific obstacles to reporting abuse or engaging with the church after abuse.

"Until and unless the church confronts its complicity in white supremacy, going beyond lament and apology to effective restitution and reparation, then it will be poorly positioned to hear and respond to Black people who cope with clergy sexual violation," Massingale wrote.

A multidisciplinary team from Loyola University Maryland, including a psychologist, theologians and counselors, studied the spiritual damage done by clergy sexual abuse to Catholics and former Catholics in Baltimore, with a particular focus on Black Catholics and former Catholics.

Through surveys and interviews, they found that due to the abuse crisis Catholics and former Catholics tended to have spiritual struggles that were interpersonal or with the institution, but not within themselves or with God.

Black Catholics said they had fewer struggles with the abuse crisis because they had already focused on their local parishes as a result of institutional racism. One participant said, "I think white Catholic churches were shaken in a way that at least my African American Catholic Church wasn't because there was already an inherent distrust in the institution to look out for us."

Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, used its sub-grant to organize a conference that explored the "structural sins" of white supremacy, Christian supremacy and colonialism in light of clergy sexual abuse.

The church needs to name and confront 'clerical fragility'

"The effects of clericalism are compounded when settler-colonial and white supremacist logics deem entire classes of people more disposable and therefore available for abuse, as well as less likely to be deemed credible witnesses to their own experience," the Gonzaga team wrote in the report.

In contextualizing the project, the team highlighted that priests who had been credibly accused of sexually abusing Indigenous communities were sent to retire in a house surrounded by Gonzaga's campus up until 2016.

Franciscan Fr. Daniel Horan attended the Gonzaga conference and wrote in an NCR column that "the quality of scholarship, the level of discussion, and the seriousness and sincerity of all the participants was exceptional."

Among Taking Responsibility's leaders, steering committee and advisory committee, there is one Jesuit. Similarly, one Jesuit, Fr. Gerard "Jerry" McGlone from the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, was among the investigators.



Jesuit Fr. Jerry McGlone, second from right, is seen with Jennifer Wortham, far left, and Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, in prayer during a sunrise walk to end abuse Nov. 18, 2021, outside the hotel in Baltimore where the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops held its fall general assembly Nov. 15-18. (CNS/Bob Roller)

McGlone, a survivor of childhood clergy sexual abuse, investigated the impacts of hearing clergy abuse survivors' stories.

"Religious coping, beliefs, spiritual practices did not change but stayed the same for those who saw a survivor’s story. Most importantly, the levels of spirituality increased, while levels of institutional betrayal and aspects of moral injury … actually went down," McGlone wrote.

McGlone concludes that "the way forward might be to embrace difficult stories."

"Contrary to popular beliefs and common myths that engaging with survivor stories 'destroys faith,' in our study, it actually does the opposite," McGlone wrote.

Related: Study of moral injury measures 'added weight' of clergy sexual abuse and its concealment