

A proposal for dealing with priest perpetrators

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea | Jul. 28, 2010 Examining the Crisis

[Examining the Crisis](#) [1]

About 5,000 priests and religious brothers have been identified as credibly accused of sexually violating minors. Most of these men were unavailable to criminal prosecution due to statutes of limitation; some within the statutes are in prison. The rest are dead, have voluntarily left the priesthood, were laicized, are residing in religious communities with more or -- usually -- less appropriate supervision, or wait in limbo for the church to adjudicate their cases.

Since 2002, there have been strong, recurrent cries to remove all credibly accused priests from the priesthood. In May, the Vatican agreed with its top sexual abuse prosecutor, Msgr. Charles J. Scicluna, declaring that abusive priests must be "amputated" in order to save the church's body from diseased parts. Once again, Rome dodged the reality that the true scandal always has been ecclesiastical cover-up of sexual abuse. There was no Vatican mention of amputating involved bishops and provincial superiors.

It is understandable that victims and others want to see abusive priests taken from their lives. After all, these priests once tore from childhood and adolescence boys and girls whose pathways to spiritual, psychological, and relational growth were obstructed, often tragically, by the destructive aftermath of sexual violation. But, is removing a perpetrating priest from the priesthood the most healing and the safest move? Both pastoral and protective concerns suggest another option.

From a pastoral perspective, the bishop and his priest have a covenantal bond that the priest will obey the bishop and the bishop, in turn, will spiritually father his priest. Excision of any member of the people of God is drastic and models a contingent kind of love all too common in the secular world. Moreover, it is a mechanism familiar within paradigms of sexual abuse: banish the evil, the pain, and the betrayal out to the periphery of consciousness -- or even better, beyond consciousness -- where travesty cannot be reflected back to us. Blessed are the invisible for they remind us not of the potential for cruelty in all of us.

Bishops and provincials also have a sacred responsibility to protect the Catholics in their care from known or likely dangers; an obligation that extends to the wider community. Recidivism is a problem among sexual abuse perpetrators. Unfortunately, science cannot accurately predict who will re-abuse and who will not. Priests, however, may be at particular risk. One analysis of sexual offenders found that men who were unmarried and who abused boys that were not family members were somewhat more likely to re-offend than other perpetrators. Further, we know that significant life stressors can induce psychological regression in which even men who stopped abusing begin again. A priest who loses his vocation, home, manner of dress, and circle of colleagues is at risk to regress and to re-abuse.

So what can we do with priests who have perpetrated? I suggest a Penance, Productivity, and Provisioning Program for these men.

Penance: Priests and religious credibly accused of sexual abuse, but not available to the criminal justice

system, would be offered residence in a containment and healing center administered and secured by secular professionals. In return for continuation as a priest, these men would agree to live here for the remainder of their lives. They could not leave the center without a security guard accompanying them. There would be no TVs, computers, or phones in their rooms and reading material, like magazines, would be screened to prevent pornography from entering the centers. Each man would work with a therapist and/or spiritual director to develop an individual penance program, including prayer. Residents would turn over their assets, retirement funding or salaries to the centers to defray the costs of their care.

Productivity: Residents would be expected to be productive, and this too could be individualized. Baking bread, tilling the soil, candle making and other crafts, teaching other residents are all possibilities. Some could generate income to help sustain the centers at less cost to Catholics. In addition, residents could make themselves available to researchers seeking to learn more about commonalities among abusive priests.

Provisioning: Resident clergy would be able to say Mass and perform the sacraments among themselves; they would remain priests. They would receive room and board, medical treatment, psychotherapy, and spiritual direction according to individual plans. Bishops would commit to visiting their priests annually to extend pastoral care and to remain conscious of the role of sexual abuse in the lives of these men, their victims, and the wider Catholic community.

Every priest credibly accused of sexual abuse would be offered participation in this program. Men who refused the program would then be separated from the priesthood without salary or other benefits canonically possible to withhold. Even then, however, bishops would remain in yearly contact with them, reminding the men that they were priests who betrayed their vocations and should be making reparation while receiving care through participation in the Penance, Productivity, and Provisioning Program.

The Vatican would do well to remember that amputation results in phantom limb pain. The "diseased" part is gone but suffering continues. Maintaining the abusing priest's attachment to the body of the church keeps him, his victims, his crimes, and his needs visible to hierarchy covenantally required to hold all of that in their sights.

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[Mary Gail Frawley-O-Dea, a clinical psychologist, was the only mental health professional to address the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on the sexual abuse crisis at their 2002 Dallas meeting, and she was one of the clinicians speaking about sexual abuse to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men that year. Frawley-O-Dea is coauthor of *Treating the Adult Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, and coeditor of *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims*.]

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