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Misperceptions of abuse problem common, John Jay report says

by David Gibson by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Several commonly held assumptions about clergy sexual abuse of minors are actually misperceptions, according to the report released May 18 on a major study of the causes and context of the problem in the United States.

The study, released at the headquarters of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, was conducted by a team of researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York.

"No single psychological, developmental or behavioral characteristic differentiated priests who abused minors from those who did not," the report said.

Furthermore, it was found that "the majority of priests who abused were not driven by particular pathologies, and most did not 'specialize' in abuse of particular types of victims." The report said 70 percent of priests referred for abusing a minor "had also had sexual behavior with adults."

It often is thought that the sexual abuse crisis in the church continues unabated today, the report observed. But it said "the peak of the crisis has passed." It said the church "responded," abuse cases decreased substantially and clergy sexual abuse of minors "continues to remain low."

Data show that abuse incidents were "highest between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s," the report noted. "Ninety-four percent of the abuse incidents reported to the Catholic Church from 1950 through 2009 took place before 1990," it said. Currently, "fewer new reports are brought forward" each year.

The researchers pointed to "archival data" they analyzed indicating that during the 1990s, despite reports

of sexual abuse received by church leaders, "the extent of the incidence of sexual abuse was not known" by them, "and the historical dimension of it also was not known."

Certain misperceptions regarding the abusers' sexuality were spelled out by the report. It said:

- "Media reports about Catholic priests who sexually abused minors often mistakenly have referred to priests as pedophiles."

The report called attention to clinical descriptions of pedophilia that speak of "fantasies, urges or behaviors about sexual activity with a prepubescent child that occurs for a significant period of time." However, it said, nearly four out of five minors abused were 11 or older at the time of the abuse.

Eleven generally is regarded in professional literature "as an age of pubescence or postpubescence," the report noted. It said less than 5 percent of priests with abuse allegations exhibited behavior consistent with actual pedophilia.

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- "Clinical data do not support the hypothesis that priests with a homosexual identity ... are significantly more likely to sexually abuse" minors than priests "with a heterosexual orientation or behavior."

However, "because of the large number of sexual abuse victims who were male minors," homosexuality's role in the abuse "has been a notable question," the report explained. It considered it "important to note that sexual behavior does not necessarily correspond to a particular sexual identity."

A possible reason that so many male minors were abused is that priests had greater access to them, the report speculated.

The study showed that "the only significant risk factor related to sexual identity and behavior was a 'confused' sexual identity, and this condition was most commonly found in abusers who were ordained prior to the 1960s."

Neither celibacy nor the church's male priesthood undergirded the sexual abuse problem, the report said. "Features and characteristics of the Catholic Church, such as an exclusively male priesthood and the commitment to celibate chastity, were invariant during the increase, peak and decrease in abuse incidents, and thus are not causes of the 'crisis,'" it said.

Priestly celibacy, consistently practiced in the church over many centuries, cannot explain the spike of abuse cases from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s and the steep decline after 1985, the report added.

The sexual abuse of minors "is not a phenomenon unique to the Catholic Church," the report said. It referred to abuse of this kind as a "pervasive and persistent" problem often found in organizations where "mentoring and nurturing relationships develop between adults and young people."

[Gibson was the founding editor of *Origins*, Catholic News Service's documentary service. He retired in

2007 after holding that post for 36 years.]

Editor's Note: The full text of the John Jay report is now available as a pdf file: **Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010**

For more coverage of the John Jay report, see:

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