

Video: Why is there sympathy for sex abusers?

Tom Roberts | Nov. 18, 2011



Viewpoint

If the Catholic community has anything to offer from its experience with the awful sex abuse scandal, it is that the problem is complex and involves human and institutional dynamics and reactions that often run contrary to everything we consider right and just.

How does it happen? The exploration of that question will likely go on for a very long time, heightened now and again by events such as the accusations against former Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky.

The current news prompted Jesuit Fr. James Martin, author and culture editor for *America* magazine, to appear on a video about an aspect of the problem -- the "grandiose narcissist" -- that he learned about during a conference on the church's problems. It is an element of the problem that has been discussed at length by psychiatrists and psychologists at conferences and in papers, but it's not been included often enough in the wider, popular discussion.

It needs to be emphasized -- as Martin does in the video -- that the inescapable bottom line is that sexual abuse of children is a crime, and the first reaction of any individual or group when learning of such behavior should be a call to police.

But much still remains to be understood about how this happens.

In a recent phone conversation, Martin said the description of "grandiose narcissist" -- often the charismatic teacher or leader about whom it is extremely difficult to imagine behavior such as sexually abusing children -- helped to explain some of the institutional reaction to such charges.

He's read about the phenomenon in secular institutions, but has at times seen it from the inside, as a priest and member of a religious community.

"Frequently, the people charged with abuse are in the community, or in your family or in your school, and so teachers, students and community members see them all the time," while the victims often remains anonymous and at a distance. "Victims may not want to reveal themselves," Martin said.

So within the community or family or school, often when charges are made, the accused becomes more easily

seen as the victim, thanks to his proximity. Within the institution, the abuser may be known, familiar, around; the victim is often not. Thanks to the narcissist's focus on himself, and thanks to the grandiose person's tendency to magnify their suffering, it is difficult for those around him not to make the accuser's "suffering" the central event.

In one instance Martin knows of, one priest reacted to an accusation against his confrere by citing all the good he had done and all the "suffering" he had undergone after being removed from ministry, and called him a saint. A third priest responded: "Saints don't abuse children."

The lesson, Martin said, is that the character traits of the grandiose narcissist "make the person into the greatest victim ever. And it can really warp the institution's perspective."

The tricky part, while exercising compassion, he said, is to not get drawn into the narcissist's web.

Check out the video. I found it a valuable contribution to the larger discussion.

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