

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 15, 2012 at 8:45am

The dangerous side effects of hierarchy

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

America may be the first nation killed by the side effects of the medicines it takes to cure its ills and keep it healthy.

We are all familiar with these warnings, which are classic products of the advertising/public relations complex. They are as slick and sleek as modern times yet as ominous as the wail of air-raid sirens in wartime London.

It's not just the law-firm-sounding array of Headache, Backache and Dry Mouth but the How-the-hell-do-they-let-them-sell-these-products possibilities of Sleepwalking, Sleep-driving, Depression and Suicidal Ideation that catch your attention. As the late distinguished lawyer Phil Corboy once said to me, "And these are only the known side effects."

Ecclesiastically speaking, there are also well-known side effects of hierarchy. Perhaps the best known is clericalism, immortalized in the indictment from the 19th century French political leader Leon Gambetta: "Clericalism, there is the enemy!"

By that, he meant that sense of privilege that makes clergy suffering from it claim exemptions from the small regulations that bind everybody, such as parking rules, as well as from blame for the large crimes for which everybody else goes to jail, such as misusing the trust placed in them by those they sexually abuse.

Recent events remind us that other special groups suffer from this hierarchical side effect that alerts those who possess it to the rich possibilities of using their power against the powerless, much as U-boat commanders watch keenly for vulnerable merchant ships to sail into their striking range before launching their torpedoes at them.

Sadly, sex abuse by church personnel is a well-documented side effect of the hierarchical structure that Pope Benedict XVI vigorously seeks to restore as a central feature of his so-called reform of the reform, also known as the overturn of Vatican II. He has the earnest righteousness that prevents him from seeing the tragic incongruity between his publicly condemning clerical sex abuse and his unknowingly enabling it through reviving the clericalism that is a killer side effect of the hierarchical structures he champions.

Sex abuse occurs in any environment in which a group of teachers, preachers or youth leaders is trusted to be given a privileged and, indeed, sacred access to young people in their care. Recent revelations about the problem of sex abuse by Boy Scout leaders that was covered up even as its perpetrators were shielded from exposure offers another example of the dangerous side effect of any social structure whose lofty aims are undermined by the hierarchy-like emphasis on exclusivity and the achievement of the Siamese-twinning rewards of power and privilege.

Mentors and leaders possess considerable power to help the powerless who are placed literally in their hands for development. This combination of being endowed with power in a trusted and honored role in the formation of the young is the secular counterpart in non-church hierarchies to the power granted to priests who function behind the mask of clericalism as they abuse the trust given to them by sexually abusing the young people they are supposed to be helping.

A parallel universe of the abuse of trust was uncovered in recent months at two exclusive metropolitan New York prep schools. The Horace Mann School in the Bronx and Brooklyn's City Polytechnic High School are highly ranked schools that admit only the highly gifted to programs that would prepare them for the finest universities and, in addition, to the keys to influence and status granted to them as graduates of these institutions.

It was discovered by revelations in *The New York Times Magazine* from graduates who had been sexually abused by faculty members at the Horace Mann School that this breach of trust had been going on for years and that it had been kept secret by those in power who had also protected the sexual abusers among the teachers -- the powerful who, in a classic hierarchical setting, had exploited the powerless students in their care.

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If, to quote Joseph Campbell's famous phrase, the hero has a thousand faces, so too do the sex abusers in privileged environments who can count on hierarchy's hard-wired readiness to protect its own and cover up their use of the power they cynically gained only because they were trusted by the powerless who poignantly lost their innocence to those they thought they could trust.

The church is never going to solve the sex abuse problem through the array of programs of child protection, fingerprinting and background checks they are supposed to be using to end this scandal. The church must examine the very structure of hierarchy that it is trying to re-establish to understand the way it is mindlessly or inexcusably creating the very conditions that make the world safe for sex abusers.

Perhaps a final side effect warning should be issued to all church officials: If you feel infallible for more than four hours, immediately seek medical or, better, theological attention.

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~~Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Kennedy's column, Bulletins from the Source URL (retrieved on 04/22/2018, 01:06am), is posted. <http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/bulletins-sign-up>. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add Kennedy to your list.~~

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