



Week #9: Pastoral Power and Sexual Misconduct: Picking Up the Pieces after Trust Has Been Destroyed by Clergy Sexual Misconduct

Prayer Before Studying Ethics:

Almighty Lord, who are a strong tower to all those who put their trust in you, to whom all things in heaven, on earth and under the earth belong, be now our defense and makes us to know and feel that there is no other name in and by which we may receive health and salvation, but only the name of our Lord Jesus.

--Prayer Book, Visitation of the Sick (adapted)

Last week, we talked about sexual misconduct by the clergy as a kind of abuse of power, i.e. clergy in ill spiritual and emotional health used the position of power they held to cross professional boundaries and exploit another person for their own gratification.

This week we will look at what pastoral care following clergy sexual misconduct might involve.

The After-Effects: Victims of Clergy Sexual Misconduct

Victims sometimes

- felt isolated before the abuse (having relatively few people they felt they could safely confide in) and
- had a tendency to doubt their own judgment or sense of self (hence turning to a pastor for counsel).

In some ways, this may have facilitated

- their vulnerability to exploitation and
- their difficulty in seeing the pastor's boundary violations, breach of fiduciary duty, and use of dual roles (pastor/romantic interest/sexual partner) for what they were.

It is also important to note the extent to which vulnerable persons were exploited more than once by different offenders (both inside and outside a professional relationship); for discussion, see Disch and Avery, 207 (who also note the prevalence among victims of prior sexual abuse in childhood).

In a way, re-victimization is not surprising, since it was not in the interest of offenders to encourage the development of a strong, confident, independent persona in the victim; instead, it suited the offender's purposes to have the victim continue in vulnerability and self-doubt and using this to encourage dependence and compliance.

When victims' dependence was exploited, their sense of self took a major blow and was in some sense shattered.

Victims of sexual abuse by clergy often report

- rapid alterations in mood, with repeated intrusive thoughts, flashbacks and nightmares.

This may involve

- intensely re-experiencing the past,
- a yearning for control to protect oneself from the offender's potential power over them (his capacity to hurt or compel them or harass them and make them a guilty and discredited object of ridicule). This yearning for absent control often takes the form of obsessive thinking about the trauma, which leaves one feeling involuntarily fixated on the traumatic moment and fearfully preoccupied with his or her relation to the offender or
 - “The pain I was experiencing was like cancer pain. It had no meaning. It was endless. There was nothing I could do about it that could bring relief...I couldn't believe that any of this was happening to me...Every waking moment of my time was filled with what was going on at church. That is the truth until this day. I sat taking my exam. I am studying to be a nurse practitioner. It is very hard word that I doing in school. I am taking this freakin' exam, and I am thinking about what is going on in my life about clergy sexual abuse. It invades my life all the time. It is always there. I want rest from this” (Flynn, 2003, p. 10)
 - “But it was like being in hell, you know. To be honest, and, yeah, that's all I could think of. I mean, I was obsessed with this thing. I mean, I could not rid my mind of this man or this—what's going on, you know. It's constantly—I'm constantly spinning my wheels about this thing. It just became my life, you know, for a while. It was really—over” (Kathryn A. Flynn, *The Sexual Abuse of Women by Members of the Clergy*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2003, 101)
- hyperarousal, i.e. feeling jittery and intense anxiety, fear and vigilance:
 - “I get very anxious. I can't sit through a church service...I guess I had a lot of anxiety attacks...I was anxious all the time, which I still fight...I am, most of the time, very anxious and very annoyed easily, just edgy. So I don't know that I've ever found that place because I don't ever feel like I am content...I've lived so long like this that I don't know what it would be like to be calm or to be completely at peace, if you will, or to be completely relaxed...I cannot imagine that every other person on the planet feels as shaky as this, as nervous as this...And it is irritating because sometimes I would really like to absolutely not feel like this...my heart's going to jump out of my chest” (Flynn, 90)
 - “And I was...I would go through periods of time where I wouldn't eat for a couple of days. I just couldn't. My stomach was too nervous. And everyone at school said I was very moody and jumpy and jittery and...I

remember not being able to sleep, but not the whole night...And I had some nightmares” (Flynn, 91)

- perceived loss of control and distress at the inability to moderate or manage one’s emotions, which seem to a independent and destructive life of their own, especially being overcome by reactive rage or vengeful feelings:
 - "My emotions were so mixed because you are angry, and you are hurt...You would never know it was coming. I would just freak out. I would just start sobbing or I would freeze” (Flynn, 111)
 - Compare Disch and Avery, 213 regarding abuse by a therapist: "On the one hand, I feel deep in me that [he] is the only true lover I'll ever have, the only one who has ever truly known me. On the other hand, I am deeply repulsed and angry at his use and misuse of me."
- an inability to concentrate or focus and feeling shut down and checked out:
 - “My attention span—I lose it a lot. Like I can’t keep my attention on some things for very long. I tend to go somewhere else, if you will...not like I dissociate, but just you know, I have a hard time paying attention to things. It –it’s—it’s just, uh the problems always seemed to be point back to that incident, and that’s where all my other issues were pointing to” (Flynn, 115)
 - Sometimes the inability to concentrate becomes a broader pattern of anesthetizing disassociation that results in the disintegration of attachment to others and a diminished sense of the value and meaning in relationships. (Previously pursued relationships and pastimes seem less pleasurable and not worth the effort.)
 - Anesthetizing disassociation can also lead to
 - alcohol or substance abuse (including prescription medication abuse) to secure emotional numbing or into
 - patterns of emotions and behavior characteristic of a younger persona which is dissonant with their actual age and pre-abuse adult persona.
- marked alterations in self-perception, with a disorienting perception of anomie
 - feeling unable to find oneself with any certainty,
 - feeling strangely unfamiliar to oneself (feeling disassociated from oneself or almost like a stranger to oneself)
 - strong (even violent) negative self-perceptions arising from shame or guilt and sometimes leading to thoughts of suicide
 - an inability to clarify or find certainty about one’s own perceptions:
 - “And the actual abuse, what I remember of it, I tend to block a lot what happened out, so I don’t recall everything...And by that point I had blocked so much out of my mind I had no idea what I was saying, if it was real, if this really happened like this, or if I had had a nightmare about it, or, you know—I had gotten to the point where I had actually confused myself about what had happened...being outside yourself and looking, looking at it happen—yes, watching it happen, being an audience to it, whatever” (Flynn, 95)

- "By far the greatest block to recovery for me is the inability to get closure. I'll never know why this man treated me as he did. I'll never know if he cared for me in the slightest. It's like I had an arm amputated and no one's acknowledging that it is missing. And no one's allowing me to find out why it was amputated, so I can't grieve its loss or get on with my life" (Disch and Avery, 213)
- feeling panicked about talking about the experience of abuse and feeling the need to self-isolate, while simultaneously feeling an almost compulsive need to talk about the experience:
 - "So, no, I didn't say anything to anybody about this. I talked to myself about it. But there wasn't, there wasn't a cultural context for this...but I couldn't tell anybody. And I think I knew. I think I did know why I was conflicted, but there was no—I couldn't tell anybody. And I didn't for years. I didn't say anything to anybody. I think I dropped—I think maybe I dropped hints here and there to people...But this is something that was mostly endured in isolation. I think you'll find out most victims, probably with any kind of abuse, but especially with clergy abuse, it's so, it's isolated. It happens in secret, and the victim continues to live with that secret (Flynn, 134)
 - "It's wanting to tell because I feel like I' gagged, and my mouth is gagged, and then other times...I know the repercussions that can happen from trying to tell...Maybe somehow this would kind of let up some—let up some of the pressure...and then I'm thinking, well, if I would tell, I would probably be treated like the rest of the victims—like trash" (Flynn, 104)

Victims often feel negatively judged and stigmatized by the congregation, the church leadership and sometimes the broader denomination as well:

- "But another part of it was when I walked into the church everyone stared. You know, everyone would whisper. Everyone was—you know—or shake their head, or you know, in disbelief, or whatever. And so, I think it's more that uncomfortable feeling that kept me out of church and well—and well, additionally, he [the abusing pastor] was there as well" (Flynn, 138)

Victims were shocked and re-traumatized at the offending pastor's ability to lobby others (members of the congregation and fellow pastors) against the victim with a view to discrediting the victim and preserving his own authority within a paternal culture that held a diminished view of woman and children:

- "The people that were in support of him were more vocal, and it hurt a lot to hear people say that I was the—doing it for the money and that, you know, that I was just, you know, like unrequited love, you know, things like that...and you know, to talk about what a good person he is...I was like, God, you people don't know him...they were saying this was something of a revenge thing and ...yes...yes—oh, and that's nothing compared with what the bishop said about me. He told this to, to this journalist who was writing a book. He told her that I—he said that I was a Lolita" (Flynn, 195)

- “I’m not going to go through the whole business with the ministers and how nasty they were. They would at first be very kind to me and within twenty-four hours, they were telling me to get out... Well, obviously they were telling me in their words that I was a ‘sick puppy,’ and I should go to counseling. I was this disgruntled, whining, complaining, sick bitch woman. I was called every name in the book” (Flynn, 193)

Victims often experienced harassment from members of the congregation—anonymous hostile phone calls or hang-up calls, insults, aggressive shaming tactics, and vandalism.

The experience of abuse, accompanied by subsequent harassment (being betrayed and abandoned by the church), often made it difficult to trust others, with victims particularly suspicious of and inclined to withdraw from contact with clergy and organized religion. Cf. Disch and Avery, 211: "Loss of hope...[f]requently the hopelessness was about future intimacy."

The church was perceived as no longer a safe place, either because of the way God was linked to the coercion or because of the supposed need to protect the institutional church by suppress or conceal the truth about what happened (“the whole church could fall apart if people knew”).

- “It still affects me. I don’t trust anybody...I don’t want to because I don’t trust him [the offender]...I don’t trust pastors. One time he [a pastor] came up to me and he was talking to me, like this close, I couldn’t handle it. What’s his motivation? When I watch men, like older men now, they’ll say things to me and all that, and I’ll just think, what’s their motivation? What do they want from me? It’s just different in how I look at people and institutions” (Flynn, 131)
- “...But what the church did...I had no respect left for the institutional church. I don’t want to ever have any respect left for the institutional church...I think I have a high degree of spirituality. But as far as embracing my former beliefs—I don’t...As for the external God, the one that sits up there and is all powerful and controls the world—don’t think He ever existed—He!” (Flynn, 180)

Notice also the common feeling among victims that, after all they had suffered (and were suffering), "they 'didn't want to or couldn't live,' that they 'had no options'" (Disch and Avery, 212), which often led to thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

- Disch and Avery (214) describe a survivor of clergy abuse "being haunted by self-condemnation, saying such things to herself as, 'You are so evil' and "Kill me, God."

Providing pastoral care for victims of clergy sexual misconduct is often difficult, given their (quite reasonable) fears about pastors and the church and their tendency to reject institutional religion.

At least the following should be said:

(1) "I find what you say credible and I believe you." This may seem banal and trite, but it is really important to victims that they are affirmed and their assertions are taken seriously.

(2) The church should extend financial support to allow victims to receive Christian counseling from a properly qualified professional counselor who

- is not affiliated with the church and
- has extensive experience in helping persons recover from sexual abuse.

(3) The church should invite (but cannot require) the victim to meet with a member of the pastoral staff (who is *not* of the same sex as the offender) for prayer and pastoral care.

(4) The church should also inform the complainant of any public outcome arising from investigating the complaint of abuse (i.e. the fact that the pastor in question has been terminated).

*I will bring health and healing to [you];
I will heal my people and let them enjoy abundant peace
and security.*

--Jeremiah 33:6

*The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.
He is my shield and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold.*

--Ps. 18:2

*I will lie down and sleep in peace,
for you alone, O Lord,
make me dwell in safety.*

--Ps. 4:8