Failure to acknowledge responsibility and to act forthrightly is a temptation to which people are very susceptible. In the biblical account, it is noteworthy that Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden begins with this human tendency to evade responsibility or to deflect it onto someone else. When God asks Adam if he has eaten from the forbidden tree, he replies: “The woman that You gave to be with me—she gave me of the tree and I ate.” Eve responds no differently, replying to God’s query regarding what she has done: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (Genesis 3: 11–13). The Lord does not take kindly to this, and the disappointing persons are expelled as well as punished. Still, the decision to expel from the unique garden its denizens without simultaneously demanding of them a process of internal character change neglects something critical. One may well ask if this is not also the prototypical case of moving problematic people from parish to parish. When Adam and Eve set out for their next home, they do so without the biblical text documenting repentance, acceptance of responsibility, or any other form of behavioral or moral evolution. The text indicates that they were punished, and that their circumstances changed radically. We are not told what internal processes or aspects of their moral behavior shifted as a result. I open with this text because in some ways it goes to the heart of the issues involved.
Within every religion, the men (and women) of the cloth are a privileged and honored class. As keepers of the faith, as interpreters of human mores for a religious worldview, and as shepherds of the flock, the clergy are held in respect. We honor them and look to them with the greatest of expectations. Respect for clergy is not limited to members of a particular faith group but transcends religious denominations so that each group understands that the clergy of all faiths are somehow an exalted group.

Ah, but the clergy are also human. And human frailty, pride, pettiness, desire, narcissism, narrow-mindedness, and deceit can be reduced—but not defeated or eradicated. Furthermore, we also know that the best of intentions can pave the way to the worst of places (Rubin, 2001). So our encounter with this sorry story challenges us to seek answers to any number of important questions. This commentary considers two: (a) What can we learn from the failure of the Catholic hierarchy to adequately protect its vulnerable parishioners from the excesses of the flawed among its clergy? And (b) How could honorable and reasonable people err so repeatedly in responding to their task?

Without a backstage look at the documents or interviews with the persons involved, we are challenged to use other means to contribute to the discussion. In this commentary, the response comes from an intermediate position. It is one based on my own individual experience, familiarity with the literature on comparable failures on the part of professional psychologists (Rubin & Dror, 1996), and intimate knowledge of another faith group confronting, and failing to confront, similar issues.

The failure of the Roman Catholic Church’s hierarchy to deal adequately with the situation on its own was compounded by its refusal to accept responsibility for these actions. Thomas Plante has presented us with a clear picture of the broad dimensions of the problem of sexual abuse by those entrusted with the victims’ protection and care. The percentage of offenders, their numbers, and an estimate of those affected in the general population yield figures that add up to an astonishing total.

If it is true that religion at its best can help people maximize their ethical potential, it is equally true that religion at its worst can appeal to the baser sides of humans and mobilize them in ways that subvert ethical judgments. It is not easy to separate belief in the teachings of one’s faith community from the need to denigrate those who believe and act differently. Religious wars and their derivatives are familiar and horrific aspects of human history as well as of current events. Common to all of this is the human ability to sharply separate the “us” and the “them.” In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, it appears that the us became the clergy themselves, and the them became the lay population who demanded redress. What started out as the clergy’s attempt to protect itself descended into attacks on those who sought acknowledgement and restitution from the Church. Certainly, one of the lessons to be learned here is the need to avoid this tendency to dichotomy.
As a religious person, my experience with an organized religion (Judaism) has been with a different system, a different belief framework, and different notions of what constitutes religious mores and proper practice. Unfortunately, my practice has exposed me to similar cases from within Jewish circles, and the responses of the clergy involved have been similar. If one wishes to criticize the Catholic system, I do not know enough to participate in the discussion. If one chooses to approach the issues as Catholic (i.e., universal), then I am able to comment from my particular vantage point. My understanding is that it takes a great deal of pressure to shift the perspective of individuals and systems in a new direction. Without it, defensiveness, denial, secretiveness, and overall hostility typically characterize the response to boundary violation and victimization.

The ethics of the professions has something to contribute here as well. Prior to the 1970s, many professional health care organizations did not have an explicit policy specifying the prohibition against sexual contact between client and clinician. It was deemed unnecessary and unseemly to have one. In Dahlberg’s (1970) account of his attempts to publish an article on the topic, he reported on the hostility and criticism to which he was subjected. Much of the criticism was aimed at his publicizing actions that would damage public trust in the profession. Nothing was said about the potential to educate the public about the dangers of sexual actions in the therapeutic relationship. It took a long time for change and acknowledgment of the issue to emerge within professional psychotherapy. Health care professionals in the United States influence and are influenced by the mores of the culture. The shift away from paternalism and toward autonomy and accountability converged with the evolution of respect for, and protection of, the rights of women and children in the sphere of attention to sexual boundaries to create change. As Plante rightly describes, the scientific information that supports many of our concerns about sexual victimization were not available when a large number of the early decisions under scrutiny were being taken. However this does not explain or excuse the failure of the victimizing clergy or the supervising system to respond adequately. What went on was wrong early on, and only became more egregious as time progressed.

The tendency to identify religion and its clergy with God can induce people to sanctify the religious system. As a result, the protection of trust and belief in the Church may seem the most desirable and worthy of goals. At another level, the immediate self-interest of the clergy and the Church also tends to predispose people to deny and avoid confrontation with the sorts of problems that will harm the reputation of whoever deals with them. The more self-centered and/or nefarious motives include awareness that those who conceal and shunt problems aside under the pretext of protecting the Church make a favorable impression within the system. They are likely to be seen by the hierarchy as team players, efficient managers, and as persons who know how to keep things quiet.
In individual cases, the strategy of denial and avoidance seems to be ethically problematic but to offer immediate rewards to those who practice it. The combination of the three representative (but by no means exhaustive) motivations mentioned above propels actions that fail to deal with the issues. The immediate results are that problems are minimized, the faith of the general population in the Church and its representatives is maintained, and the system works well—for a while. This kind of approach works only until a strong sense of outrage and revulsion gather into a groundswell to affect change. Yet sustained outrage and clamor for change are developments that are far from assured. Historically, the attempt to defend an unworkable system characterized the Roman Catholic Church’s attempt to defend the Ptolemaic system long after the evidence strongly favored Copernicus (Sobel, 2000). In analogous fashion, the clerical hierarchy of the Catholic Church retained the familiar system that placed itself, rather than the needs of its parishioners, at the center of its system. Ultimately the weight of the evidence and the continuing public outcry from within and without forced a paradigm shift in behavior. Potentially, these developments have the ability to stimulate the kind of religious soul searching and church-community reevaluation of their relationship that can produce deep-seated and genuine change. Whether that kind of fundamental re-evaluation has occurred is something that time will reveal.

People’s accountability to one another is a fundamental aspect of human relations. Seeking to honor the individual preferences of another person is equally fundamental to human relations. When the clergy, the religion, or a profession identifies its self-interest with accepting responsibility, acting honestly, and redressing mistakes, crimes, or sins, a climate is created and maintained that fosters respect for the dignity of each individual person. The beauty of the ideal and the grit of the real rarely dovetail; nonetheless, it is far easier to reach for the former in an environment where the norms are one of accounting and accountability. Fundamental to my own faith community is the importance of examining and accepting responsibility for one’s negative actions as part of the process of true repentance (Soloveitchik, 1996). Seeking to redress the mistakes and becoming worthy of obtaining forgiveness from one’s fellow is part of the change process (Levinas, 1994). It is unethical and immoral to sexually victimize another person or to be involved in actions that compound the damage. For the religious person, this is understood as a violation of one’s duty to persons and to God. This is a compound violation, and one that in the Jewish tradition requires that one accept responsibility and request (and obtain) forgiveness from one’s fellow before one can seek release from God. Forgiveness from one’s fellow cannot come from God—only from one’s fellow human being.

There are ethical, moral, and practical lessons to be learned from an examination of the Roman Catholic Church’s response to the sexual victimization scandal. The failure to forthrightly accept responsibility for their actions is most prominent in this deeply troubling story. Certainly in a religious framework we can label the
repeated failures to accept responsibility committed by the sexual perpetrators and by the unresponsive hierarchy as sins against persons and God. There was a continuing failure to respect the basic human dignity of the individual victims, their families, the potential victims, and the community at large. Respect and care for the other, owed to all these persons, can be summarized in the requirement to be “my brother’s keeper”—irrespective of any and all other considerations. Those who victimized the vulnerable, and those who failed to respond appropriately to the ongoing crisis, also did not manage, or “keep,” themselves in the required manner. Every opportunity missed to rectify matters was an additional failure by the individual clergyman, and another breach of duty owed to the victim and the community. Those who fail at the task of keeping themselves and their brothers (and sisters) risk, similar to Cain, involvement in acts of violence against the spirit and the body of other persons. Respect for the dignity of another human being is the most basic lesson to be learned here.

REFERENCES


Condemnation or Helpful Guidance?

Armin Paul Thies and Mary Marple Thies

The purpose of Dr. Plante’s article, “Bishops Behaving Badly” is somewhat unclear. He does provide a valuable service by clarifying that the rate of sexual abuse of minors by priests is no greater, than among other categories of men, although perhaps