

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Child Abuse and the Catholic Church: The Need for Dialogue and Justice

Psychologists for Social Responsibility is an international organization of clinicians, academicians, researchers, and activists dedicated to the understanding and application of psychological knowledge and expertise to contribute to the optimal health of all citizens and, ultimately, to peace and justice throughout the world. Consistent with this mission, we believe there is an urgent need to address the devastating world crisis of child abuse in the Catholic Church. It is our hope that this statement will reach victims and their families, perpetrators and their families, community and world leaders, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church so that all of us may begin a dialogue that is open-hearted and healing.

There are now reports of documented child abuse by priests and other ministers in the Catholic Church that span several generations in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. Tens of thousands of boys and girls have been severely traumatized (Bennhold, Kulish, & Donadio, 2010; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004). Violation of a child's body by an adult perpetrator who should be a protector—parents, teachers, religious leaders—is especially serious because it is a betrayal of trust as well. Lasting biological and psychological injury often results from such trauma (Felitti et al., 1998; van der Kolk, 1987; Wylie, 2010). Physical repercussions include structural and functional abnormalities in the brain, malfunctioning of the neuroendocrine system, and weakening of the child's immune system. Abuse also results in increased risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, criminality, and other psychological difficulties including attachment disorders that distort social connections in childhood and adult life (Herman, 1992; Schwartz & Goulding, 1995).

Beyond the trauma of having suffered at the hands of an adult in a trusted position of authority, children and their families are traumatized by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church when leaders minimize and cover-up this scandal. This strategy of deception by those in power compounds the emotional blow to these children as they feel utter powerlessness and confusion, which often continue, even intensified, into adulthood and result in the internalization of profound fear, shame, sadness, and lifelong mistrust of others. As a result, their freedom to grow into healthy human beings is severely constrained, sometimes eclipsed (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 2000).

At the same time, we fully recognize the good works that so many nuns and priests perform daily—fighting disease, malnutrition, and illiteracy in unsafe and impoverished pockets of the world. How sad and unfortunate is this devastating crisis of assault on vulnerable children amidst these noble and courageous acts, acts that our organization and members value and seek to support in the work that we do. We convey our empathy to members of the Church who are struggling and disillusioned with the puncturing of their deep trust in the Church as a consistent instrument for peace and good will toward all.

We want to see an end to this abuse that appears to be built into the fabric of the structure of the Catholic Church. The prevalence of abuse and the decades of cover-up need to be powerfully confronted. The Church cannot be immune from prosecution for direct abuse as well as trauma resulting from the cover-up.

It is clear to us that the Church cannot monitor itself—this should be evident to all. A monitoring system, independent of the Church hierarchy, is necessary to track this situation, to monitor these crimes of abuse, and to set standards for treatment of victims and their families and for perpetrators and their families. This is a very complex process and it is an urgent matter.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility welcomes the opportunity to contribute to efforts directed toward ending this wide-scale trauma and to setting in motion a process of wide-scale healing.

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Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to issues of peace, social justice, human rights, and ecological sustainability. For more information, please contact us at info@psysr.org.

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