Shame and Scandal: Clinical and Canon Law Perspectives on the Crisis in the Priesthood

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Shame and scandal: Clinical and Canon Law perspectives on the crisis in the priesthood

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1. Introduction

This paper describes and synthesizes formulations and hypotheses derived from the authors’ clinical and canon law analyses of some of the factors that may have contributed to what has been widely perceived as a longstanding failure of Roman Catholic Church authorities to effectively address evidence of sexual abuse committed by a relatively small number of Catholic priests. While some of the formulations offered here may have relevance to attempts to explain the etiology and psychodynamics of the abusers themselves, this paper is \textit{not} about the etiology of sexual abuse, but rather offers hypotheses about some of the factors that may have contributed to a culture of secrecy and silence, with subsequent disastrous effects. While the two types of analyses presented here could stand alone and could have been presented as topics in separate papers, the authors believe there are significant interrelationships between factors associated with each of these realms—clinical observations and canon law—and we have attempted to describe them and how each can reinforce the other.

A brief summary of the history of the recent crisis should provide a context for these analyses. Since January of 2002, the United States news media have disseminated countless reports of allegations of sexual offenses against minors by Catholic priests and other clergy, and of alleged cover-ups, in particular, the failure of some in positions of authority in the Roman Catholic Church, especially its bishops, to take the appropriate administrative and legal actions in these matters. Led by an investigative team from the \textit{Boston Globe}, reporters from across the United States have also provided extensive coverage of the associated legal proceedings—civil and criminal, past and present—and of the vociferous public debate that has accompanied each new allegation or revelation (Investigative Staff, \textit{Boston Globe}, 2002; as an example of other coverage, see Meacham, 2002).

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The history of the current wave of accusations stretches back over three or four decades; in one instance, civil lawyers have examined diocesan records for evidence regarding complaints made over the span of the past 50 years. The critique of the bishops comes from all quarters. Victims and their families, the laity in general, and law enforcement officials and judges have all expressed outrage and incomprehension at the actions and inactions of the episcopacy. To these voices, the bishops have recently added their own. Public self-criticism and apologies are now frequent, and the most prominent Catholic archbishop in the United States, Boston’s Cardinal Bernard Law, has resigned his post.

There is ample evidence that the sexual abuse of children, young teenagers, and even adults by people in positions of authority and trust is a problem that the Roman Catholic Church, and other powerful institutions, both secular and religious, must confront and take more effective steps to prevent in the future (Berry, 1992; Dias, Simantov, & Rickert, 2002; Jenkins, 1996; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). Policies developed by the American Conference of Catholic Bishops and promulgated in June of 2002 represent a major attempt to take such steps, yet, they too have created controversy in relation to the so-called zero-tolerance provisions, which have raised important issues of due process and statutes of limitation [McKenna K.E. The Dallas Charter and Due Process. America, 87 (7), 7–11].

The phenomenon of sexual abuse is not, as we all know, unique to the Roman Catholic Church, nor is a pattern of behavior in which the need to protect the existing power structure dictates denial and secrecy when civil law and/or social norms, rules, or values have been violated. These phenomena, often linked, occur within families (Paine & Hansen, 2002), in schools, and in the fully adult realm of the workplace at all levels of society (Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richardson, et al., 1988; Garfinkkel, Bagby, Waring, & Dorian, 1997; Levine, Risen, & Altho, 1994), including the military (Harned, Ormerod, Palmieri, & Collinsworth, 2002; Munson, Miner, & Hulin, 2001). Most recently, sexual abuse and its consequences, in particular, the effects of cover-ups that protect perpetrators instead of victims, have been the subject of increasing public concern and an urgent topic of investigation and debate among those in the legal and judicial professions and among mental health clinicians and researchers (Investigative Staff, Boston Globe, 2002; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Many questions have been posed about the assessment, etiology, and treatment of sexual abuse tendencies within individuals (Becker & Murphy, 1998) about the incidence of sexual abuse in the general population (Pryor, 1996) and within specific groups (for a discussion of complaints by academic, professional, and semiprofessional and blue-collar women, see Fitzgerald et al., 1988) and about the corrosive effects of silence, suppression, and denial (Summit, 1983).

This paper represents an attempt to integrate the perspectives of its two authors—one a clinical psychologist and one a professor of law, who is also a Jesuit priest and former Jesuit college rector—on the phenomena of silence, suppression, and scandal avoidance that characterize the current crisis in the Church in the United States and beyond. Ultimately, our joint focus has been on how the psychological dynamics of individuals may interact with the culture that surrounds them—a culture that, in this instance, includes the values and prescriptions embodied in canon law—and on some of the critical questions that have arisen over the past year and a half: How could so many priests and other religious betray the most basic tenets of their vocations, not once but on many occasions, sometimes over many years? Why did the bishops fail to act decisively when presented with solid evidence against sexual

1 This article is based upon “The Crisis in the Priesthood,” a joint presentation by the authors in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, at the Twenty-Seventh International Congress on Law and Mental Health of the International Academy of Law and Psychiatry, in July of 2002.
abusers among their clergy? Why were they so secretive and thus so unaccountable to victims, to church members, and to society at large? Did they not understand that they were abandoning their responsibilities to children, to parents, and indeed, to the whole community of the Church, including the clergy?

As we considered these questions from psychological and legal perspectives, narcissism, as both a general term and a specific psychological construct, emerged as a concept useful for understanding some aspects of what appears to have been a decades-long tendency of Church authorities to conceal such misconduct.

First, we propose that narcissism can play a critical role in the psychological development, character organization, and psychopathology of some men who are studying to become or are already ordained as priests in the Roman Catholic Church and that narcissistic tendencies and perspectives have contributed to the failure of many authorities within the Church to act effectively to protect children and teenagers from priests prone to sexually abusing minors.

Second, we hypothesize that an obsession with secrecy and the failure to contain offender priests, including through appropriate legal channels, is associated with, among other factors, what might be called institutional narcissism—a focus on self-protection that threatens to overshadow the dedication and service of the vast majority of the clergy and to compromise the work of the Church itself.

We propose that narcissistic character traits and processes, along with other factors, significantly contribute to abuses of power of all kinds, both individual and collective. Although the Roman Catholic Church serves here as a context for observations about individuals and even as an example of institutional failing, the conclusions to be drawn are likely applicable to a broad range of individuals and to a whole spectrum of the institutions to which they belong.

### 2. Narcissism and the temptations of power: A psychological perspective

Well before the current crisis, the first author had observed that a significant number of individuals in this subgroup of his psychotherapy practice appeared to have personality organizations or features that could be classified as narcissistic. Whatever their chief complaints may have been on initial evaluation, that is, whether they described themselves as being depressed, or anxious about obsessive thoughts or preoccupations, or having difficulty in their relationships with others or with issues of sexuality and sexual identity, many of them seemed also to be struggling with feelings of grandiosity or those emotional states that grandiosity can serve to defend against: feelings of inferiority, shame, and fear of scandal. Most clinicians would agree that these are among the hallmarks of narcissism. While this patient sample is by no means fully representative of the entire population of Roman Catholic clergy, it is hypothesized that some critical variables associated with the vocation can reinforce certain personality traits, which, when present, can lead to potentially disastrous consequences.

Whether one prefers Otto Kernberg’s “object relational” or Heinz Kohut’s “self-psychology” formulations regarding narcissistic development, character organization, and psychopathology (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971), the Greek myth about Narcissus—the beautiful youth who cruelly spurns the love of the water nymph Echo and subsequently falls in love with his own image as reflected in a quiet

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2 All of the patients whose experiences are presented below have given the authors their permission to discuss their cases, with the provision that their names and identifying details not be revealed.
forest pool—offers the basic framework for understanding the psychological term that bears his name. The details of the story, in its various retellings (e.g., Bulfinch, 1962; Cooper, 1986), in particular, the themes of echoes and mirror images, serve as metaphors for the self-absorption, lack of empathy, and social detachment of the narcissist as that personality type is defined clinically and discussed in psychological circles. The DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) offers specific behavioral criteria for the diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, including grandiosity, an excessive need for admiration, a sense of entitlement, arrogant or haughty self-presentation, and a sense of specialness. It also emphasizes an underlying fragility of self-esteem, portraying narcissistic individuals as being hypersensitive to criticism despite outward appearances and noting that criticism “may leave them feeling humiliated, degraded, hollow, and empty” and/or lead to aggressive postures masked by “an appearance of humility.”

Shame, and its distinction from guilt, is central to the problem of narcissism and to both of the perspectives presented in this paper. Tangney (2002) refers to this distinction, and he discusses embarrassment and pride as the “self-conscious emotions” and links them with perfectionism, proposing that perfectionists are particularly prone to those self-conscious emotions. Morrison (1989) emphasized in Shame: The Underside of Narcissism that shame is a central affective experience of narcissists, and that it is most often still viewed in relation to Freud’s (1914) concept of the ego ideal, which involves “internalized standards of what one should be” (Gabbard, 2000). As described by Gabbard (2000), the ego ideal prescribes what one should be, while the superego or conscience, which is generally understood to develop later and to be associated with the more complicated affect that we call guilt, proscribes—condemns or forbids—what one should not do. Shame is understood as a painful affect associated with a sense of defect, inferiority, or failure to live up to one’s internalized standards, which Bibring (1953) also termed “narcissistic aspirations,” whereas guilt includes an awareness and regret for the pain that one has caused others. Tangney and Dearing (2002) support this formulation. They emphasize a distinction in which “shame involves fairly global negative evaluations of the self . . . [whereas] guilt involves a more articulated condemnation of a specific behavior.” Analyses of the construct of shame often refer to the feeling as involving the experience, actual or metaphoric, of being seen or exposed, and to defenses against this experience as involving hiding and secrecy (see, e.g., Wurmser, 1981).

In combination with a family milieu that communicates repressive attitudes toward sexual and aggressive impulses and ideals of perfect virtue and purity, developmental experiences involving painful injuries to one’s self-image and/or parental overidealization often result in an unstable sense of self and self-esteem, a limited capacity for mature and satisfying relationships, impairments of an individual’s capacity for empathy, and superego deficits. These are deficits and impairments that often produce high levels of shame and, in reaction, a need for strong defenses against experiencing this painful affect (Broucek, 1982). In relation to the narrower topic of this paper, among those who have faith in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, distortions of its theology and teachings regarding the concepts and experiences of confession, repentance, and forgiveness may come to be used in support of those defenses. In addition, narcissistically impaired individuals—individuals whose concern with their own self-image interferes with their capacity to feel empathy with others—may be drawn to the priesthood to counter or neutralize feelings of inadequacy, impotence, and inferiority through a social role that allows them instead to feel superior, special, admired, and powerful. When such needs and defenses are incorporated within an institutional structure, the institution then reinforces the individual’s own behavioral inclinations to sustain an idealized self-representation. In the context of this tendency toward grandiosity, for both the individual and the institution, scandal must be avoided at all cost, even through
the concealment of inappropriate and illegal behavior, and this is rationalized in the argument that the faithful will remain so only if ministered to by individuals who are seen as exemplary, if not flawless.

2.1. Illustrative cases from clinical practice

Among the relevant subgroup of patients in the first author’s practice are those one could classify as “grandiose narcissists” at one end of the spectrum and “failed aspiring narcissists” at another. The smaller group, the grandiose narcissists, consists of the more blatantly self-absorbed. These are individuals who, despite the prominent presence of pride in the Roman Catholic Church’s catalog of sins, have extremely inflated self-representations, crave admiration, and lack empathy (see Sipe, 1990). They are often preoccupied with grandiose fantasies that focus upon what the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association 1994) calls “unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.” They have a sense of grand specialness and, as a result, feel entitled and can be exploitative; yet, they can also be plagued by feelings of envy and inadequacy.

When such individuals become engaged in religious vocations, these traits may be masked by a persona of humility, and their sense of their own specialness may be expressed through a striving to appear especially holy, a striving that far exceeds the ambitions to holiness, for example, of most, if not all, of their peers, whose “prayerfulness” and virtuousness they continually monitor. While feelings of inadequacy, defectiveness, and low self-esteem associated with the primary affect of shame are usually kept at bay by this kind of defensive grandiosity, these defenses can be unstable, and the individual may periodically feel a sense of emptiness and/or waves of self-doubt and humiliation.

One patient who fit this first subtype of narcissist had experienced a sudden, but persistent and frightening sense of emptiness at one point in his previous secular life, a time when he felt “on top of the world,” with an impressive and highly paid corporate position and a beautiful girlfriend who had begun to push for marriage.

This diocesan seminarian, we will refer to him as William, had been increasingly troubled by suicidal impulses when he had a religious conversion experience that ultimately led him to seek the priesthood. His vocation, apart from its spiritual meanings, enabled him to restore his grandiose defenses, his sense of specialness and superiority, through assuming the identity of a man set apart from others by a call to the priesthood—God’s will for him. As a side benefit, he used his new role to sexually exploit adult women who were drawn to him because of his extraordinary good looks, the mystery of the ostensibly unavailable celibate, and his pseudoattentiveness to their pain and needs. All the while, he felt secure in his and their knowledge that his vows precluded any kind of long-term commitment, let alone marriage.

It should also be noted here that William was one of those who had been referred for treatment by a superior and that his intense but brittle grandiosity and coexisting paranoid tendencies led him to experience psychotherapy as very humiliating and to defend against it through an aggressive stance, in which he experienced his therapist as an unappreciative and belittling presence. It might also be suggested that this man’s personality structure contained an inadequately developed superego. He tended to take “as if” moral positions (Deutsch, 1942), loudly and publicly embracing certain central values of the Church while failing to act accordingly. For instance, he was fervently pro-life but was seemingly devoid of compassion for those actual human beings he encountered from day to day. This proclivity, combined with his dread of emotional closeness and his lack of empathy, rendered him at risk of exploitative, antisocial behavior, including the potential for the sexual abuse of females, perhaps even minors.

Despite this individual’s sense of fusion with an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God and his identification with the supremely sacrificing Son of God and the Church, under the guise of promoting
humane works and sharing his Christian love, all he did, in fact, was engage in the sexual exploitation of women, with little sincere guilt or remorse. Whenever he experienced some small degree of shame as a result, he went to confession and the cycle began again.

It is important here to emphasize again the difference between shame, which implies a consciousness of impropriety or one’s shortcomings in relation to an ideal and the two more mature and intertwined emotions of guilt, which is most often defined as an awareness and acceptance of culpability for wrongdoing, and remorse, that is, the inner pain and distress arising from the knowledge that one has harmed another person (Morrison, 1989). William’s confessions were not motivated by guilt or by remorse for the damage that he might have inflicted on the women he exploited but were instead fueled by his sense that his image as an ideally virtuous seminarian might have been tarnished by his actions. His limited capacity for empathy or genuine compassion prevented him from taking other people’s points of view, from being able to “feel with” them, which might have ameliorated his narcissistic tendency to focus primarily on his own needs and how he was seen by others. His primitive superego and impaired capacity for empathy compromised his ability to relate well to others, to feel love, guilt, or true remorse for wrongdoing.

Another patient, a seminarian referred to herein as Andrew, also employed “as if” behaviors—actions in the service of an idealized role—to present to the world a more elevated persona, in effect, a false self (Winnicott, 1965), including various lies about his background, current achievements, “holiness,” and the degree to which he was the favorite of his religious superiors. He was not truly grandiose, however, since he was often conscious of such actions, could describe them in therapy as manipulative (consistent with one of the subtypes of narcissist that Bursten (1973) identified in 1973 as “the manipulator”), did feel some internal conflict about them, and reported that they were insufficient to prevent him from frequently feeling inadequate. Andrew’s conscience was somewhat more developed than William’s, although still significantly weak, but shame rather than guilt was most prominent in Andrew’s inner life, for reasons connected to his personal history.

Andrew had been aware of his homosexual orientation quite early in life, and he had suffered much abuse in his childhood and adolescence from peers who aggressively attacked him as effeminate. He had found comfort, support, and a sense of worth, and beyond that a certain fuel for inflated fantasies, in his mother’s idealization of him and in his involvement with the Church. His plight illustrates the way in which the culture that surrounds a religious faith can sometimes serve as a powerful mediator between an individual’s personality structure and dynamics and his or her unmet emotional needs. For Andrew and many others whose sense of self has been wounded or is vulnerable, the crucial element is how a man committed to entering the priesthood is seen and how this affects how he sees himself.

When Andrew spoke of his first assignment to a practicum in a parish, he described how the parishioners in this small town immediately treated him as a special person, reenacting his mother’s idealization of him and countering the devaluation of his father, brothers, and peers during his childhood and adolescence. He described a church picnic, for instance, at which the proverbial little old lady asked him, as she made ready to serve him dessert, whether he liked cherry pie. When he said that he did, he was sent home with more cherry pie than he could possibly consume in a week. When he walked down

3 Winnicott’s concept of the “false self,” although it has since been more widely applied, originally referred specifically to individuals who, in response to maternal empathic failures, develop a compliant persona “devoid of hatred and ‘negative’ feelings” (Campbell, 1966). This false self appears to characterize some individuals in religious vocations that demand behavior that reflects only love, compassion, and forgiveness and do not permit expressions of anger or other forms of aggression.
the street, getting to know the town, people honked their horns and waved. During a session in which he
offered numerous other examples of the respect that had been shown to him, this young man said, “You
know, if I’m not careful, this will go to my head.” As his story unfolded, it became apparent that he was
not and it did, but over time that, was dealt with in his therapy.

Another remark by this same seminarian captures his own acknowledgement of the power of the
priesthood, especially with regard to reversing a man’s negative, devalued self-representation and
covering it with an idealized self who is powerful and admired by others. “When I feel inadequate,” he
once said during a therapy session, “I put on my collar and it’s like Clark Kent going into a phone booth
and coming out Superman.” Another patient expressed a similar thought when, in discussing the
positive side of his ambivalence about remaining a priest, he said, “I love the superhuman superiority.
It’s great for the ego.”

Donald Cozzens, the former rector of a diocesan seminary who is now a teacher at a Jesuit university,
confirms the dangers of such narcissistic temptation and the ways in which it may support the
development of a clericalism that encourages priests to feel powerful and special, apart from and above
the laity, to a degree that, to some extent, they may become “prisoners of privilege” (Cozzens, 2002), a
phrase similar to what the first author referred to as “prisoners of pride” in an earlier version of this
paper.

At the other end of the spectrum of narcissistic individuals within the relevant sample are those we
might think of as “failed narcissists”—patients who were unable to mobilize and maintain strong
narcissistic defenses, including grandiosity, over the long haul and thus experienced chronic feelings of
inadequacy and defect, including painful levels of shame and what has been called anticipatory shame
anxiety (Levin, 1967). These individuals, like grandiose narcissists, are inordinately concerned about
how others perceive them, but their fantasies and fears focus on dreaded humiliations or failures to live
up to a perfectionistic ego ideal should they, for example, misspeak when reciting at Mass or clumsily
drop the wafer during Communion.

A Jesuit scholastic whom we will call Robert exemplifies this group. He was a young man who
seemed even younger in appearance and manner than his chronological age would suggest. He described
himself as having been a loving son and a good boy throughout his childhood, adored by his mother but
brutally picked on by his peers. Conservative and devout in his religious beliefs and practices, he came
into therapy because of an admixture of depression and anxiety associated with homosexual desires that
he could barely acknowledge to himself, let alone a therapist.

Robert was hyperattuned as to how he was being perceived by others, and he was especially
fearful that others, seminarians and priests in particular, would perceive him as having sinful
thoughts. He often felt panicky in chapel, certain that his attraction to a fellow seminarian had been
observed by others, a panic that could be seen as an intense form of shame anxiety. As the current
crisis unfolded, Robert expressed increasing anger, almost approaching rage, not with priest offenders
so much as with the media, the messengers tarnishing the idealized image of the priesthood. It is
hypothesized that his and similar personality organizations, which include a hypersensitivity to being
evaluated and a fear of subsequent criticism, promote a tendency to cover up one’s own failures and
wrongdoings and those of any other persons or groups that the individual idealizes and with whom he
or she identifies.

For these three clients, narcissism limited their capacity to function honestly as human beings and
to act effectively and appropriately within the context of their religious vocations. Individuals like
Andrew and Robert, however, because they are willing to acknowledge and struggle with their
personal failings, including their narcissistic tendencies, are often able to grow both psychologically and spiritually.

2.2. Clinical formulations

A clinical analysis of the psychodynamics and character organization of some of the clients referred by the Church generates some compelling and potentially useful psychological hypotheses about the Church’s history of cover-ups.

While there are no adequate epidemiological data describing the incidence of character or more acute forms of psychopathology\(^4\) within the population of those studying for the priesthood or already ordained as priests, there seems to be a significant subgroup, although still a minority, within this self-chosen population who have narcissistic character organizations or significant narcissistic character features, which, in addition to other factors, may have drawn them to seek religious vocations and may affect their functioning during their training and ministry.

This is by no means a new thought. Some years ago, for example, the clinical and forensic psychologist Reid Meloy (1986), using an object relational framework, theorized that the incidence of narcissistic psychopathology among clergy of all or most faiths was high, and that this was “precisely because the profession provides strong reinforcement for such personality problems,” a phenomenon related to what the first author views as the “stimulus value” of a profession. One could argue with the estimate of Meloy of how prevalent this kind of pathology is among those who have chosen a religious vocation. It is likely that most of the individuals who are drawn to the priesthood or ministry have higher level character organizations and possess psychological strengths that make them relatively immune to the temptations to grandiosity that their vocations can proffer.

Nevertheless, the clinical picture described in this article is highly consistent with most of the formulations of Meloy (1986) about the etiology of narcissism and about the tendency of narcissistic individuals to seek out positions of power, prestige, and authority. More specifically, the first author’s experience as a psychotherapist strongly suggests that for some, a call to priesthood can involve a temptation to an already inflated yet fragile sense of self, no matter how genuine and relatively uncomplicated that call may be for others. Meloy also describes how the primitive defense mechanism of splitting (Kernberg, 1975)—perceiving and responding emotionally to ideas and to others as if they were all good or evil, with no middle ground in between—can be a “consensually valid and theologically comfortable aspect of preaching.” The associated tendencies of narcissistic individuals to idealize or devalue others, also described by Meloy, were frequently exhibited by the seminarians and priests whose cases are discussed above.

This subgroup of patients, who struggle in one way or another to maintain unrealistic self-representations, have often had idealizing mothers, disappointed or rejecting fathers, negative

\(^4\) While compelling epidemiological data are unavailable, some studies assessing the psychological functioning of a general sample of priests or comparing such samples with nonpriest control groups have been undertaken, but generated inconsistent findings. See, for example, Kennedy and Heckler (1972) and Nestor (1993). Other studies have compared the psychological characteristics and psychopathology of cleric and noncleric molesters of children and adolescents (Haywood, Kravitz, Grossman, Wasyliw, & Hardy, 1996; Haywood, Kravitz, Wasyliw, Goldberg, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Langevin, Curnoe, & Bain, 2000), including tendencies to minimize psychopathology on psychological tests (Wasyliw, Benn, Grossman, & Haywood, 1998).
experiences with peers in childhood and adolescence, and experiences of being devalued and rejected, terrified and humiliated beyond the usual playground teasing and adolescent testing. One very insightful and articulate young seminarian punctuated an elaboration of a painful interaction with his father with the statement “I don’t have to tell you of all people, Dr. Kochansky, about the many priests who have negative feelings about their fathers.” While this is certainly a gross overgeneralization, several of my clients did perceive their male parents’ ambivalence about them at an early age, and reactively feared, were ashamed of, and/or disliked their fathers. One reported, without any apparent awareness of the obvious Oedipal implications, that at the age of seven, he had created an altar—in his parent’s bedroom, of all places—and that he would dress as a priest and say Mass before it, much to the delight of his mother and his aunts but to the considerable consternation of his father.

Direct experience with this sample of patients supports the observation made by other clinicians that a mother’s strong support for, if not excitement with, a son’s interest in the priesthood has often been a potent factor contributing to the vocational decisions of a significant subgroup of the Catholic clergy. In particular, it can solidify a preexisting Oedipal bond between an idealizing mother and an insecure son. This was once dramatically concretized in a component of the ordination ceremony, in which the hands of the man being ordained were wrapped in a linen cloth that was then anointed with oil and later presented to his mother; upon her death, the cloth was placed in her coffin and buried with her. During therapy, several priests have indicated that this was often understood as a near guarantee of the woman’s salvation, and although this may be a distortion of a discontinued practice, it conveys the view that a mother is blessed when her son becomes a priest.

Other Roman Catholic liturgical practices can also fuel narcissistic fantasies in that subgroup of priests prone to inflated self-representations and needing constant support. After hearing a person’s confession and assigning acts of contrition, the priest intones, “May Jesus Christ absolve you, and, by his authority, I absolve you of all of your sins.” This language identifies God as the source of forgiveness, but it also implies that it is the priest, through the ministry of the Church, who has the power to mediate between God and the penitent. Even more striking, during Communion, the celebrants who consecrate the Host and the wine do so saying, “This is my body,” and then, “This is my blood,” using the first-person possessive when referring to Christ’s body and blood.

This theological fusion and its liturgical expression has the potential to reinforce a narcissistic priest’s need to support the grandiose self through merger with a perfect, omnipotent, admired “other.” A further complication results from the fact that this fusion can activate the longings of parishioners for the love and protection of an idealized father figure, and this, in turn, may support a narcissist’s grandiosity, including a denial that the priest is, in reality, a fallible human. This could, in part, account for the initial, and in some cases, intractable, reluctance of the parents of children abused by their parish priests to report such offenses to law enforcement officials or even to Church authorities. Similar dynamics have fueled the refusal of many parishioners to believe that their pastor could have committed a sexual or any other offense, or that some bishops have failed to adequately protect minors, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Reflexive attacks on the messenger, including the Boston Globe, which played a major role in uncovering allegations of abuse and exposing subsequent cover-ups, often ensue. For a time, after the current crisis hit the newspapers and the airwaves, one patient in the first author’s practice, a young priest, devoted a part of each session to a tirade against the media. In conveying the way in which his own sense of self was being threatened and wounded, he spoke with anger and despair of “being left as road kill,” although he himself was not guilty, nor had he ever been accused, of any sexual offence.
Narcissism affects an individual’s relation to reality, producing, for example, defensive denial of any facts or perceptions that contradict an inflated self-image, as well as the devaluing of any even faintly critical perspectives offered by others. Even more importantly, it also limits an individual’s capacity for empathy and for interpersonal closeness and thus undermines impulse control and fosters loneliness and isolation. In the context of the Catholic priesthood, impulsive or chronic predatory sexual activity with minors, or with any others who, in concert with the abuser’s own grandiosity, idealize a priest to the point of being unable to question his actions, may represent pathological attempts to achieve limited relief from such loneliness.

These clinical formulations lead to the prediction that, absent intervention, narcissistically impaired priests will be plagued by their proneness to experience shame and associated embarrassment and humiliation and by their need to expend defensive energy to ward off shame by efforts to conceal defects. “Hide and secret” rather than “hide and seek” is the narcissist’s guiding principle for maintaining affective homeostasis.

A Renaissance fresco by Masaccio, in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, seems relevant here. Entitled *The Banishment of Adam and Eve from Earthly Paradise*, it portrays an anguished Adam covering his eyes while Eve covers her breasts and genitals as they are driven from Eden by an angel armed with the sword of God’s wrath. Although the art historian Mario Carniani refers to the panel as a portrayal of guilt and remorse (Carniani, undated), the gestures of the central figures seem more consonant with the more developmentally primitive emotion of shame. In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are not ashamed of their nakedness until they ate the forbidden fruit, after which they attempt to hide themselves from God. From the perspective of the concerns of this paper, Masaccio’s image captures an element of Catholic theology that has been taken up in teachings by those who may themselves be struggling to protect an underlying sense of defect and to ward off shame through concealment, including the concealment offered by idealized, even grandiose, self-representations.

We would suggest that where shame has primacy over guilt, mechanisms that allow the narcissist to overcome his anxiety about exposure, in particular, through privately confessing to wrongdoing in a safe, accepting setting, will allow him to experience relief through the outward acts of confession and ritualized penance. This, of course, differs from the way in which individuals with higher level character organizations will understand and make use of this sacrament. For these more mature individuals, guilt has primacy over shame (although shame will also be present), promoting genuine concern for the victims of their injurious actions and true contrition, atonement, and reparation.

Traditional practices that have long been part of training for the priesthood may also inadvertently fuel narcissistic tendencies within an individual. One very astute candidate for the priesthood described how seminaries, while very supportive in many ways, can be places where “everybody is watching everyone else...to make sure,” as he put it, that “nobody is doing what they wish they were doing.” Other priests have spoken of a practice, sometimes called “chapter” or, without irony, *exercitium caritatis* (“an exercise of charity”), that was once common as a part of an individual’s religious formation but has since been abandoned by most modern seminaries. In this exercise, a seminarian, when his turn came up, stood before a group of his peers who were then expected to criticize him for certain behaviors and traits, publicly shaming him and, we might speculate, most likely fostering a longing for secrecy and an urge to hide. (As we will discuss in the second section of this article, this process exposed seminarians to the importance of *fraternal correction* as a means of responding to violations of the Church’s own canon law, one that is often viewed as preferable to exposing clerics to secular civil and criminal processes and punishments even when secular laws might also have been...
violated.) In addition, some seminaries and training programs apparently go to great lengths to stress the priest’s role as a public person, emphasizing that he is always being observed and evaluated by the faithful and must, above all, avoid scandal. Whether these practices call seminarians and priests to virtue or to secrecy is an open question.

Together, all of these threads weave a pattern that one could predict might blind Church authorities, some of whom may be driven by their own narcissistic needs and defenses, to the true nature and consequences of the offense of the sexual abuse of minors and lead them to use poor judgment when faced with credible evidence of such activities by their priests.

Obviously, this beginning of an analysis of some psychological factors that may have played a part in what is now described as the crisis in the priesthood has not addressed others that may be equally relevant. For example, William Meissner, a Jesuit psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, has recently pointed to other reasons for the actions taken, or not taken, by several U.S. bishops, ranging from their having received bad advice from well-meaning mental health professionals or attorney advocates to their sincere and well-intentioned belief in forgiveness and “their trust in God’s grace and spiritual restitution” (Meissner, 2002, personal communication). These circumstances and motivations cannot be dismissed. However, as will become apparent in the next section of this paper, an analysis of certain aspects of canon law offers compelling support for the idea that a collective form of narcissism has played a major role in the current crisis on an institutional level.

3. What were the bishops thinking?: Some reflections from the perspective of canon law

Many factors have contributed to the recent crisis of clerical sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. At the seminary level, the crisis has startlingly brought to light the inadequacies of screening for applicants and the need for a priestly formation that provides a sound, candid, and extensive psychological understanding of human sexuality, including celibacy. On the episcopal level, where the mismanagement of abusing priests has compounded harms, the church may need to reexamine its criteria for choosing bishops. On an institutional level, the crisis has exposed the lack of any structures that hold a bishop accountable for his personnel decisions and the absence of meaningful lay participation in them.

In the context of a critical event with multiple causes, I would like to single out, as one factor among them, the role that certain ecclesiastical values may have played in the behavior of many North American bishops over the past several decades. To do so, it is helpful to turn to the Catholic Church’s 1983 Code of Canon Law, referred to in the text as the Code (The code of Canon Law, 1983).5

A principal repository of any society’s values is its body of laws, and this is no less so in the case of the Church. An examination of several prominent values, as embodied in the Code, and in subsequent commentaries and episcopal statements, suggests that inadequate responses to clerical abuse in the United States over the past several decades were not merely personal reactions invented by individual bishops with faulty judgment. Rather, these responses might better be understood as institutionally guided decisions based on institutional values. Far from seeing themselves as intentionally harmful or wantonly negligent, as the broader society has come to view them, the U.S. bishops may have thought

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5 The 1998 translation by the Canon Law Society of America is the source of the text of the canons cited below.
that they were acting in accord with ecclesiastical norms, which do seem to both reflect and support, at an institutional level and albeit inadvertently, the narcissistic needs and defenses of individual priests described above. If so, guiding episcopal responses to any future sexual abuse cases will require institutional change. Replacing one bishop with another will not be sufficient to safeguard against more abuse.

3.1. The ecclesiastical culture’s expectation of its clerics

To understand episcopal reaction to a cleric’s sexual misdeeds, it is helpful initially to understand what the Church expects of its clerics in sexual matters.

To begin with, canon law clearly states that the conduct of a cleric is to be judged by a different norm than the Church applies to its other members. “All persons are called to live a chaste life in accordance with their particular state in life. Clerics are subject to special canonical penalties in the area of sexual misconduct because they are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence and therefore to live a chaste celibate life” (Canonical Delicts Involving Sexual Misconduct and Dismissal from the Clerical State, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995; hereinafter cited as Delicts).

This statement begins with an allusion to traditional Catholic moral teaching regarding all members of the Church. Lay men and women, no less than clerics, are obliged to conduct themselves in sexual matters in a manner appropriate to their state as either single or married persons. The cleric, however, stands in a category by himself. Celibacy’s demands, voluntarily undertaken, set a cleric apart. He does not aspire to celibacy; he must be celibate. “The vocational choice to remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is not simply an ideal” (Delicts 3). On this point, Canon 277, §1, is unambiguous:

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy which is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity.

Episcopal reactions to sexual infractions on the part of priests must be understood in the context of this high theological level on which the Church has placed its celibate clergy. Performance must be “perfect” and “perpetual.” It is God himself who gives the gift. The minister is “sacred” and his heart is to be “undivided” in serving God and others. In addition to being mandatory, the obligations of clerical celibacy are also public. They are part of the Church’s tradition and are embedded in its publicly promulgated law.

A person raised so high can fall very far. His fall can also be singularly visible. Indeed, unlike other members of the Church whose sexual acts may be immoral and, in some instances, even illegal, a cleric’s serious sexual misdeeds may additionally constitute a canonical crime. “In the Church, because of the cleric’s special rights, duties, and privileges, canon law singles him out in this area [of serious sexual offenses] and allows his misconduct to be punished canonically while a lay person who commits the same acts is not subject to similar ecclesiastical penalties” (Delicts 5).

With expectations so high, the risk of seriously disappointing the ecclesial community is correspondingly great if a cleric is seen to fail in his celibate obligations. Or so, at least, it may appear to the cleric and, more to our point, to his bishop.
3.2. The Avoidance of Scandal

Canon law is also deeply concerned with the role of scandal. Unlike American civil law, where the concept is rarely found, the Code of Canon Law uses the term 28 times. Unfortunately, the Code does not define its terms. Consequently, as Thomas J. Green points out in his 1985 commentary on Canon 13116 (Coriden et al, 1985), “It is not entirely clear what is meant” by scandal. The word may carry its technical meaning in moral theology (The Code of Canon Law, 1985). There, the term “signifies not so much something shameful and therefore likely to cause a reaction of indignation and outrage, but something that provides occasion and incitement to the sin of another” (Miller, 2003).

This meaning differs from the popular understanding of scandal as an act causing moral shock, but the word may carry both meanings in the Code. Some canonical offenses might entice others to sin. For example, a cleric regularly living out of wedlock with a woman might inspire some other cleric to do so too. Other canonical offenses, however, such as child abuse or murder, would not be likely to attract others to commit the same offenses; rather, these crimes would cause scandal in the sense of moral shock. In any event, an act that might cause another to lose faith would be scandalous by either the technical or the popular definition of the word.

From the canonical point of view, causing scandal is a major harm that should be avoided. When it occurs, that harm must be repaired. Canon 1341 states, for example:

An ordinary [i.e., the bishop in most cases] is to take care to initiate a judicial or administrative process to impose or declare penalties only after he has ascertained that fraternal correction or rebuke or other means of pastoral solicitude cannot sufficiently repair the scandal, restore justice, reform the offender.

The American bishops’ statement on canonical delicts—faults or offenses—emphasizes the same values. In considering a response to serious misconduct, a bishop must be concerned with three goals:

(1) Repair the harm caused by scandal.
(2) Restore justice.
(3) Reform the accused cleric. (Delicts 11)

Both the canon and the bishops’ statement give primacy of place to scandal’s role. If scandal can be repaired, or if there is no scandal because the act is not itself scandalous, or the act is not known to others (and therefore, ipso facto is not scandalous), these facts weigh against imposing any canonically penal consequences.

In the second place, the canon acknowledges that there may be a need to restore justice. From the standpoint of the civil law, it is striking that the canon subordinates the role of justice. One might infer that harm caused by scandal is worse than harm done by injustice, whereas the civil lawyer would think.

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6 The influential 1985 Commentary (Beal et al, 2000) served as a principal guide for understanding the Code over the following 15 years, a period encompassing the bulk of episcopal decisions about abusing clergy that have been recently questioned. Concerning the subject matter of this article, a revised 2000 Commentary is in accord and will be referenced where relevant.
that the law’s foremost concern would be the restoration of justice. Perhaps, the American Commentary comment on Canon 1341 reflects the same view. In explaining the canon’s dictates, the Commentary reverses the order of priorities: “This canon indicates briefly how the legislator views the finalities of penal discipline: the restoration of justice, the reparation of scandal, and the reformation of the offender” (Thomas J. Green, Commentary on Canon 1341, p. 911).7

The canon itself, however, as well as Delicts, makes the presence or absence of scandal the first consideration in deciding how to treat an accusation, and Canon 1395 reinforces the priority of scandal’s role in weighing the gravity of canonical crime. This canon addresses itself specifically to sexual offenses:

§1 [A] cleric who lives in concubinage...and a cleric who persists with scandal in another external sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue is to be punished with a suspension...[and if he persists may be dismissed from the clerical state].

§2 A cleric who in another way committed an offense against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue, if the delict was committed by force or threats or publicly or with a minor below the age of sixteen years,8 is to be punished with just penalties, not excluding dismissal from the clerical state if the case so warrants.

Section 1 targets continuing sexual offenses, such as concubinage. This, and any other external sexual offenses producing scandal, is subject to the grave penalties of suspension or dismissal from the clerical state.

What is the weight of those offenses targeted by §2, including abuse of a minor? The 1985 American Commentary on the canon takes a somewhat different view from that, later taken by the U.S. bishops. The Commentary says that the section

deals with certain nonhabitual clerical offenses, which are especially serious if they are perpetrated publicly, or with force or threats, or with a person of either sex under the age of sixteen years of age. Initially such an offense is not viewed as seriously as the preceding ones since only “just penalties” are imposed (Thomas J. Green, Commentary on Canon 1395, p. 9299).

Presumably, the 1985 Commentary bases its view on the fact that §2 addresses nonhabitual offenses. It acknowledges, however, that even these nonhabitual offenses, if not corrected by remedial measures, may ultimately justify dismissal from the clerical state.

In 1995, the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops published Delicts, during and in response to rising public controversy over clerical sexual abuse. The bishops took the view that Canon 1395 divides sexual offenses into “persistent misconduct” (§1) and “aggravating circumstances” (§2)

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7 Green’s 2000 commentary follows the same order as the canon, placing the reparation of scandal first. “Canon 1341 is the only provision in Book VI expressing the key purposes of penal discipline: the repairing of scandal, the restoring of justice, and the reform of the offender” (Thomas J. Green, New Commentary, p. 1558).
8 As of April 25, 1994, the age was raised to 18 within the territory of the National Catholic Conference of Bishops (see Delicts 6).
9 The 2000 Commentary makes the same point: “Somewhat surprisingly, the Code does not seem to view [§2 offenses] as seriously as other violations of clerical continence...” (Thomas J. Green, New Commentary, p. 1600).
(Delicts 5–6). Thus, from their perspective, and contrary to the views of the 1985 Commentary, §2 offenses are more grievous than those of §1. “[W]orse than the offenses of §1, [§2 offenses] represent an especially despicable violation of the cleric’s duty since they involve acts that generally victimize another person and cause grave scandal and harm to the Church” (Delicts 6–7). The heinousness of the delict may merit dismissal, even if the cleric has not persisted in his offense. Whatever the level of seriousness that Canon 1395 ascribes to child abuse relative to concubinage, scandal is an operative factor that makes all sexual crimes worse.

Because of the commitment to perfect and perpetual continence, sexual misconduct on the part of a cleric can be a source of great scandal to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. . . .[This is] the theological basis for the Church’s decision in canon 1395 to classify certain grave forms of clerical misconduct, such as the sexual abuse of minors, as canonical delicts. (Delicts 3–4).

In so far as public scandal aggravates the inherent harm of an offense, then, canon law fosters a dynamic in favor of reducing scandal, that is, keeping offenses out of public view.

Surely, this is exactly the path some bishops have followed. In doing so, they were not reacting merely as individuals following their own inclinations as dictated by their personality organizations and/or psychodynamics. They were also consciously or unconsciously institutional actors, pursuing a set of values promoted in church law. The tools to avoid scandal are familiar: pastoral advice not to file civil suits; encouragement not to report abuses to the police, or otherwise make complaints public; failure to warn others of impending harm; out-of-court settlements (even at very high financial cost) when suits were filed; confidentiality agreements; resistance to discovery procedures; the impounding of filed documents; and the sealing of court records. Such devices kept from public view the seriousness, frequency, and historical longevity of clerical sexual abuse and exposed many more victims to harm. Even if one bishop knew the extent of abuse in his own diocese, neither he nor any other single person knew, or could know, the true extent of clerical abuse across the United States or across the rest of the world. Not only did the facts of any particular case remain hidden, the number of cases was unknown. Fear of scandal’s harm, articulated in the canon law itself, drew every bishop—drew the institution of the Church itself as a whole—toward a discreet and disastrous silence. A determination to keep the faithful from seeing the failings and sins of its clerics led to the greatest loss of trust in the history of the North American Catholic Church. Would the exposition of clerical crimes really have been so destructive as this course of action?

3.3. The Pastoral nature of canon law

In addition to limiting scandal, the canon law espouses a second value that is also quite foreign to most secular criminal or civil forums. The canon law is pastorally motivated. Such benevolent concern may have echoes within secular family and juvenile law in the United States; in some jurisdictions, even the criminal law recognizes a need for restorative and therapeutic justice. In general, however, rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders is accorded, at best, a low priority in current U.S. criminal law. Admittedly, civil lawyers and judges have also begun to employ alternative dispute resolutions, including mediation and negotiation in place of traditional adversarial trials. In comparison with all of these secular trends, however, the canon law far more emphatically prefers to avoid formal adversarial proceedings. Certainly, any member of the Church has access to ecclesiastical courts. “[T]he Christian
faithful can legitimately vindicate and defend the rights which they enjoy in the Church before a competent ecclesiastical court in accord with the norm of law” (Canon 221, §1). The Code, nevertheless, expressly and repeatedly urges settlement of cases wherever reasonably possible. Among the canons governing judicial tribunals, for example, Canon 1446 states:

§1. All the Christian faithful, and especially bishops, are to strive diligently to avoid litigation among the people of God as much as possible, without prejudice to justice, and to resolve litigation peacefully as soon as possible.

§2. Whenever the bishop perceives some hope of a favorable outcome at the start of litigation or even at any other time, the judge is not to neglect to encourage and assist the parties to collaborate in seeking an equitable solution to the controversy and to indicate to them suitable means to this end even by using reputable persons for mediation.

§3. If the litigation concerns the private good of the parties, the judge is to discern whether the controversy can be concluded advantageously by an agreement or the judgment of arbitrators according to [canon law].

Other canons repeat Canon 1446’s general statement in favor of nonadversarial and informal dispute resolutions. Canon 1718 urges the bishop to avoid useless trials and to consider whether it is expedient to “resolve equitably the question of damages” with the consent of the parties (see also cc. 1659, 1676, 1695, 1713–16, 1733, and 1742).

The canon law’s preference for pastoral solutions rather than adversarial ones is particularly apparent with respect to the imposition of penalties for offenses. “Much more so than in secular society, church authorities should reflect gentleness, patience, and pastoral charity in dealing with those violating the ideals of the community” (Thomas J. Green, Commentary, p. 894). Canon 1341, discussed above with respect to the role of scandal, explicitly requires a bishop to consider whether an accused can be reformed through “fraternal correction, rebuke and other ways of pastoral care” before the bishop initiates a judicial or administrative procedure to impose or declare penalties. Delicts follows the same structure. Where it is clear to a bishop that a cleric has committed a grave offense punishable by dismissal from the clerical state (as abuse of a minor may be), the bishop is restrained from starting a judicial process unless he is convinced that less drastic steps are insufficient to achieve the pastoral goals of repairing scandal’s harm, restoring justice, or reforming the cleric (Delicts 12). Such steps may include fraternal correction, reprimand, and other pastoral remedies. The 1985 commentary on Canon 1341 sums up the law’s position: “The canon reflects a principal concern underlying penal law reform: penalties should be employed only as a last resort after all other pastoral measures have failed to deal with a problematic situation. Hence, church authorities should not be too swift to impose penalties; rather they should use all available legal-pastoral options before imposing penalties” (Thomas J. Green, Commentary, p. 911).10

While Canon 1395 (concerning violations of clerical chastity, including abuse of minors) permits the most drastic penalty of dismissal from the clerical state if a case warrants, the analysis of the American Commentary is significant. The Commentary was designed to help “the literate Catholic leadership

10 See also New Commentary (p. 1558), reiterating the same point.
personnel of [the United States]” (Commentary, p. xv), including bishops. With respect to violations of clerical chastity, the Commentary states:

Great care should be exercised by church authorities in this delicate area. Frequently the most beneficial approach is a therapeutic rather than a penal one, especially if there is diminished imputability [responsibility] on the part of the cleric. However, while the well-being and future ministry of the offending cleric are key considerations, due cognizance also has to be taken of the damage done to the community and individuals within it (Thomas J. Green, Commentary on Canon 1395, p. 929).

This passage, although it carries no binding legal force, may nonetheless accurately reflect what many American bishops may have been thinking when they had to decide on what to do about an accusation of clerical sexual abuse. Therapy rather than punishment: The well-being and future ministry of the offending cleric are key. Other considerations are not excluded, but they are not primary. Bishops who thought and acted this way were acting in accord with an institutionally expressed preference for pastoral solutions.

Consistent with its pastoral character, the canon law deeply respects every person’s good name and reputation, including that of any accused person. Canon 220 declares that “[n]o one is permitted to harm illegitimately the good reputation which a person possesses nor to injure the right of any person to protect his or her own privacy.” The law’s regard for privacy may also have played a formative role in episcopal reactions to accusations of clerical abuse. Canon 1719, in accord with the principal of 220, requires that “[t]he acts [documents] of an investigation, the decrees of the ordinary [usually the bishop] which initiated and concluded the investigation, and everything which preceded the investigation are to be kept in a secret archive of the curia if they are not necessary for the penal process,” which is itself a last resort.

This canon promotes privacy and good reputation, as well as limiting any possible scandal. Bishops who kept files from the public view were, from a canonical standpoint, acting in accord with an express ecclesiastical value; indeed, a value that is not at all foreign to the secular law. Privacy and good reputation are common concerns of secular civil and criminal statutes. Grand jury minutes, like the documents of canonical investigations, are kept secret unless needed for trial. The bishops may be criticized, and perhaps rightly, for their protectiveness of their personnel files. But the canon law suggests, once again, that their way of acting was rooted in institutional values.

3.4. Some initial conclusions

Privacy and a person’s good reputation deserve protection. Pastoral solutions, such as reformation and reintegration, are often wise. Drastic penalties should be a last resort, and limiting scandal’s harm is a worthy goal. Celibacy voluntarily undertaken for the loving service of God and others can be affirmative. There is nothing wrong and much that is right about these values.

But when the single-minded pursuit of these goals leads to the neglect of other values, great harm can befall the community. Some bishops’ imbalanced and institutionally motivated attempts to avoid scandal and to act pastorally towards offender priests resulted in continued grievous injury to children, their families, the church faithful, and to society at large. Justice requires the ecclesial culture, its leaders, and its laws to recognize other values, too. People do not want a church community that elevates the
avoidance of scandal above the welfare of children. They want an ecclesial culture that meaningfully remedies abuse, instead of one that keeps up good appearances. They call for procedures that are accessible to all, open and transparently fair to the accuser and the accused. They wish to see bishops, as well as other clerics, accountable for their actions and omissions. In an attempt to avoid scandal, bishops failed to recognize these substantive and procedural values. Sadly, that failure created a greater scandal than the abuse itself.

As Ladislas Örsy has made clear, a neglect of values on the part of the law can result in a serious communal breakdown, or even anarchy (Örsy, 1992). “A pertinent example,” Örsy points out, “is the absence of effective provisions for the judicial protection of the fundamental rights of the faithful... There are few adequate laws to open the door for an effective participation of the laity in the life of the church; the control over their initiatives by the clergy is so far reaching that it can be stifling...[T]here are no adequate structures that would assure that the laity is heard by the hierarchy...” (Theology and Canon Law, pp. 95–96 and n. 13.) The neglect of such values increases the potential for clerical sexual abuse.

The Catholic bishops of the United States, under the pressure of the public explosion of the abuse crisis, have recently created new policies that emphasize the need of the church to protect victims (see Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, approved December 2002). The bishops have called for the establishment of review boards, with a majority of lay members to act as consultative bodies to a bishop in cases of alleged sexual misconduct with minors (Norms 5). They have also mandated that a cleric found guilty of even one act of sexual abuse be removed permanently from ecclesiastical ministry (Norms 8). These steps fall short of dismantling a culture in which the avoidance of scandal is a dominant factor. Indeed, one may wonder whether the bishops’ demand for zero tolerance was not itself motivated by a perceived need to avoid the scandal of not responding adequately to public pressure. In the end, one can hope that the crisis itself has done much to dismantle the ecclesiastical fear of scandal. If so, at least something good may have come out of it all.

4. Discussion

The psychological and ecclesiastical legal analyses presented above focus upon some of the factors contributing to what has widely been viewed as an extraordinary failure of an institution and its leaders to appropriately address, over the course of many years, the sexual offences perpetrated against minors by a significant number of Catholic priests, many of whom repeatedly abused the same persons and/or serially abused multiple minors. The clinical data and examination of canon law presented in this study are relevant to the hypothesis that a morbid fear of scandal fueled an obsession with secrecy, which contributed to the failure to deal effectively with offender priests, including through appropriate legal channels.

The authors of this paper also propose that over the past three decades, the primacy of the goal of avoiding scandal at all costs was multidetermined, resulting from factors associated with the character organizations and psychodynamics of individuals as well as institutional values emphasized in the canon law. While humility is highly valued and pride a sin to be avoided, priests and their leaders are constantly exposed to temptations from within (intrapsychic) and without—from family, parishioners, aspects of their training for their religious vocations (formation), and other Church teachings and values—that, for
some, may fuel a need to experience oneself and be seen by others as perfect. This, in turn, requires intrapsychic defensive operations that contribute to the development and support of the grandiosity and sense of superiority associated with narcissism. These developmentally lower level defense mechanisms (Kernberg, 1975) include splitting, denial, idealization, and devaluation of others, perhaps, even the devaluation of victims of abuse and their families, who, by lodging complaints, threaten an idealized self/institutional representation. The construct of narcissism also includes an absence or deficiency of empathy, and in fact, it would seem that empathic concern, when present in the Church’s history of dealing with sex offender priests, was most often focused on the still idealized offender priests, whose good works were praised, while the injuriousness of their offenses was minimized, rather than on the victims of the abuse. A recent defense by a Church leader of his failure to respond differently to evidence of a priest’s sexual abuse of minors involved the claim that he was unaware of the potentially injurious effects of sexual abuse. At best, this may reflect an honest admission of an impaired capacity for empathy, that capacity, which, when sufficiently available, enables the average person to grasp the potentially damaging effects on a child or adolescent of premature sexual stimulation, the profound betrayal of trust, and the silencing of truth that sexual abuse entails.

The present authors would also propose that narcissism is relevant to abuses of power in all institutions. We would suggest that the recent spate of corporate scandals in the United States, often referenced by “the Enron scandal,” represents examples that the concepts of narcissistic grandiosity, omnipotence, and entitlement help to explain.

An examination of canon law, viewed as a repository of ecclesiastical values, reveals the specialness of priests—that they are considered to be individuals set apart from others by a number of factors, including by the Church’s expectation and their promise to remain celibate. It follows that public awareness of the sexual misconduct of priests could be seen by Church leaders committed to maintaining the specialness of priests as a threat to this value. This specialness, as institutionalized within the history and current structure of the Church, is also reflected in canon law’s prioritized list of responses to the misconduct of priests. The well-being of the offender priest, with an emphasis on keeping him active in the Church because the work of the priesthood is of such extraordinary importance, is placed before other values, including justice. This aspect of the Code can reinforce the grandiose tendencies—needs, fantasies, and associated behaviors—of priests with narcissistic character traits.

4.1. Recommendations

The Roman Catholic Church in the United States must certainly be commended for its use of thorough psychological screening and evaluation of applicants for study for the priesthood, for its support of psychological treatment for seminarians and priests, and for educational components that attempt to help its clergy address key issues of human sexual development and functioning—endeavors that were well underway before the current crisis.

We suggest that all of these programs should be reexamined and strengthened, and that those who design and administer them should include assessment of the potential problem of narcissism. Screening evaluations should target patterns of grandiosity and/or histories of significant narcissistic injury with associated vulnerability to similar future injuries, and those in a position to make decisions or recommendations in relation to an individual’s future as a member of the clergy should be sensitive to these issues. This sensitivity should also inform course work, supervision of practicum experiences, and interactions in the context of didactic small groups. In addition, perhaps, existing practices and
programs could be modified to address some of the interpersonal problems associated with narcissism (e.g., through role playing and other techniques and methods that foster empathy and compassion).

We would also urge an approach to the education of those called to the priesthood that emphasizes that seminarians are, despite being important theological symbols, human and not divine; that despite their own best intentions and parishioners’ idealizations of them, priests and other religious are, like the rest of us, admixtures of strengths and weaknesses, good and bad.

In their Norms, the U.S. Catholic bishops have taken important steps toward remedying clerical sexual abuse. But church leaders and church laws, while conscious of the real harm that scandal can do, should take steps to deemphasize scandal as a factor in decision making. These steps should be publicly articulated. So long as a jealous regard for its own status and the status of its clerics predominates over other values of justice and the welfare of people, the church community runs the danger of repeating the errors that have cost it so much.

We would hope for an approach that can provide priests and seminarians, as well as members of religious orders, some significant immunity against the temptation to allow their special status within both society and the Church to go to their heads. This approach should be designed to help them learn, through education, psychotherapy, or any other effective means, religious or secular, how to love, enjoy closeness within celibacy, have genuine empathy for others, and achieve acceptance of the realities of who they themselves are, thereby allowing themselves greater freedom to pursue their true vocation.

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