

Sex Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church

Forum Notes

On November 15, 2019 the Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture and the Center for Jesuit Education convened a conversation for faculty and staff to discuss how, as a Jesuit Catholic University, we should be responding to the clergy sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. Fr. Pat Howell (Interim Director, ICTC) opened the event with an historical overview of the sexual abuse by clergy and malfeasance of bishops in dealing with the abuse. Jodi O'Brien (Sociology) facilitated the conversation. About 35 participants included several upper level administrators, members of the Jesuit community, and faculty and staff from various departments and units across campus. Those gathered mentioned several reasons for attending: personal experience; grappling with feelings of outrage, betrayal, need to address systemic evil, and a crisis of faith; a desire to be part of radical reform efforts in the Church; and invested in seeing the university engage deeply in responding. Across this diverse group, which consisted of many faith/belief positions and experiences, there was strong agreement that this crisis requires a sustained, coordinated response oriented to accountability, healing, reform, and renewal.

Thinking about Response

In table discussions, participants shared ideas for response. Recommendations included emphasis on the need for broad-scale, radical change that is rooted in caring for victims; addressing and reforming clericalism; and acknowledging and intervening in organizational patterns of secrecy and silence that have enabled an alarming history of persistent abuse.

Participants also agreed that as a university we are not only obligated to respond, but can do so in ways that reflect our mission of both *cura personalis* and *cura apostolica*. Through our teaching, academic work, and community engagement we can educate others in the long history and organizational dysfunctions that result in this sustained crisis, we can highlight the voices and experiences of those who have suffered through this systemic abuse; and we can also offer models of shared governance and accountability that might serve as correctives.

Importantly, discussants voiced that as scholar/educators in a Jesuit Catholic university, we can demonstrate processes for facing directly into the crisis, for grappling with the tensions, contradictions, and dysfunctions in the Church that underlie this moral catastrophe. All assembled agreed that there is no quick fix and that, as a university, we need to keep this issue front and center long after it has ceased to be a media sensation. This work requires a coordinated effort across departments and units.

Next Steps

- A coordination of efforts across departments and units. Specifically, first steps will include an inventory of what is already being done across these units and unit-specific needs and concerns (e.g., Campus Ministry is working with mostly a student population who may have specific needs). [*Note; Anne Moran is already tracking the efforts across the campus*]
- Facilitating ongoing conversations among groups of students, staff, faculty, and community members focused on care for people, healing, and accountability. [*Campus ministry is doing this with students*]
- Issue a call for campus-wide expertise to be assembled into a public roster.

- Create and maintain a hub-oriented website consisting of recommended resources, campus experts, and links to related events on campus and in the community. *ICTC can do this.*

Events already scheduled:

- **Lament and Hope: the Crisis in the Catholic Church**
An opportunity to reflect what it means when Church leadership fails in its service.
Dr. Eileen Burke-Sullivan, Vice Provost for Mission and Ministry, Creighton University
Sunday December 2, 5:30-6:30pm, Student Center 160
- **A Church in Crisis: How Did We Get Here? How Do We Move Forward?**
Dr. Richard R. Gaillardetz, Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College
Tuesday, February 12, 7pm, Pigott Auditorium
- **Dr. Tricia Bruce**, sociologist and researcher, discusses institutional constraints to Catholic Church reform - Tuesday, May 14 at 7pm, Student Center 160

Accumulated notes from Table Discussions:

How has the recent news around misconduct and deception in the Catholic Church affected you? What is the impact on the campus?

- Recognition of the negative role of clericalism: a special group of people with special rules and secrecy. Note: This came up multiple times.
- Shame, weariness, discouragement as this has been going on for over 30 years.
- Although there is a focus on the institutional failure and the role of the bishops in covering the problem up, the basic problem stems from failures at an individual level. Of the priests who were involved and are still alive (some living freely in society), it appears unfathomable that not one has come forward to fulfill their duty to take responsibility and acknowledge their guilt. If one of them comes forward, others might follow suit.
- Are priests seeking (medical and/or spiritual) help for their failings? If they don't recognize their failings, is the Church doing something to get them the help that they need?
- People are leaving the Church due to being put off by judgmental evangelicals, and the Catholic Church now no longer offers an alternative view of Christianity, with the result that the largest group will soon be the "None"s (no religious affiliation). Practically, this has led to donors reconsidering their financial contributions.
- Concern about the future of the Church as this is only the tip of the iceberg considering how few states have actually empaneled grand juries thus far.
- Recognition that the Church struggles with certain aspects of the whole human person, and human sexuality is one of those.
- How does race fit into this? How can we examine this across the globe/ Role of predominantly male institution; Women as second class citizens/ Anti-LGBTQ

What might our role be as a Jesuit Catholic university to repair harm and rebuild trust?

- The Church is an institution, and all institutions have natural defense mechanisms. We need sociologists to analyze the problem and to recommend solutions.
- The Seattle Model was an informal precursor to the Dallas Charter. Perhaps we can again take the lead.

- The Church has appointed bureaucrats to handle this issue, but bureaucrats do nothing. Additionally, the bishops cannot be trusted to clean house, so perhaps the laity needs to take the lead regardless of institutional support.
- CST and CIT can address sexuality the same way it does social justice.
- Conduct public events (e.g., a national forum) for people who want some Catholic association, but don't want to be in the Church.
- Be more up-to-date with technology; e.g., video recordings of on-campus events so that links can be sent to donors and the younger generation.
- Take on a prophetic role if more news comes out.
- Help students think critically about this issue from multiple dimensions that move beyond the initial responses.
- Be more imaginative about the role of students in the Church; e.g., consider them as the Church (rather than considering how the Church needs to reach out to them).
- Can we give our students (address distress, enrollment, retention) an imagination—you are the church, you are equipped to read, think critically AND dream and build
- We have to learn how to create safe spaces to have these very difficult, emotionally charged conversations
- Lead with passion for the victims—listen to the victims and their families and those who care for them
- Look to the Academic model: shared governance – structure /model consequences