

## EFFECT ON VICTIMS

We talked with many men, some young men who are still leaving adolescence behind them, others who are middle aged with grown children. They described the impact sexual abuse at St. Anthony's Seminary had on their lives. The Board wants to share what it learned from these men by offering our impressions and observations of their experiences. It is important to keep in mind that children develop a sense and understanding of sexuality from authority figures, and that boys came to the seminary at age thirteen or fourteen years, when they were uniformly young and impressionable.

In general, reactions and responses to sexual abuse are not the same for each individual, except that an overwhelming majority rejected the Catholic Church. Thus, the effect and impact on victims abused at St. Anthony's varied from one victim to another. For some there was immediate, profound trauma, indelibly imprinted in their consciousness. For others, it was not until later in life that memories returned, sparked by an upsetting occurrence that triggered traumatic flashbacks. Although these episodes were painful, they often provided relief through a new-found understanding of the difficulties and struggles in their lives.

### Central Themes

The following are recurring themes that we found among the victims:

*No one would have believed me over a priest.*

Some believed themselves to be the only ones who experienced sexual abuse. Others did not believe that they were the only ones subjected to such

abuse. As one man said, "No one would have believed me over a priest." That statement reflects the cultural attitudes the boys perceived to exist at that time, that a young boy's allegations against a priest would have had little or no credibility. As a general principle, it is more difficult for an adult victim to be believed when an offender is a respected member of the community, such as a teacher, doctor or law enforcement officer; and no one was more respected in the community of the seminary than a priest. Many students related that in addition to fear of being disbelieved, they felt there was simply nowhere to turn, no "approachable figures" to talk to about issues of sexuality, let alone sexual abuse.

*Am I a homosexual or have I become homosexual?*

Unlike girls who have been molested by a female, boys molested by a male often find themselves struggling to sort out the true nature of their sexual orientation. It is common for abused boys to ask, "Am I a homosexual or have I become homosexual because of being molested by a man?" Or they question why they were chosen: "Is there something feminine about me?" As a result of their sexual abuse, many St. Anthony's students were confused about their sexual orientation, and some subsequently experimented with homosexual relationships in an attempt to understand who they were sexually as men. In contrast, there were some who identified themselves as gay prior to being abused and did not believe the abuse to be a factor in their sexual orientation.

*Had I been a real man, I would have been able to stop the abuse.*

Some men experienced damage to their personal sense of masculinity. Our culture's definition of masculinity does not allow for boys to be nonassertive, fearful, vulnerable or helpless. From childhood on, boys learn that masculinity

means not being weak or passive, in short, not being a victim. It is common for victims of sexual abuse to have feelings of failure for not being able to live up to stereotypical views of masculinity by successfully protecting themselves. They reason that if they had been real men, they would have been able to stop the abuse. It is not surprising that some of the survivors have a history of hypermasculine behavior, violent acting out, rebelliousness, or problems with authority. They were demonstrating an overcompensating "maleness" to address feelings of inadequacy. The ability to find security or comfort in one's identity as a man is impaired or precluded by the experience of sexual victimization.

*Even though I know I can trust my girlfriend, I am constantly haunted by the fear she will betray me.*

Many of the victims disclosed a history of difficulty in establishing and maintaining stable, close, trusting, intimate relationships. Some became involved in abusive relationships, mirroring the sexually abusive episodes they had already experienced. They found it difficult to become intimate and vulnerable within a relationship because they were afraid to be hurt or taken advantage of again. One man expressed his feelings about this by saying, "Even though I know I can trust my girlfriend, I am constantly haunted by the fear she will betray me in some way." To some, just a simple touch on the arm by a girlfriend or wife is sometimes intolerable because it triggers their memory of the abuse.

*I idolized priests. I wanted to be just like them.*

Abuse perpetrated by a cleric often causes serious spiritual damage. Seminarians, whatever their level of commitment to becoming a priest, were at least contemplating such a vocation. One victim stated, "I idolized priests. I

wanted to be just like them." Many victims came from families who held priests in high regard and enjoyed close friendships with priests, in some instances, the actual offenders. However, a familiar pattern emerged: after being abused, many students left the seminary early, causing families to speculate about their reasons for returning home; the apparent reason in many cases was academic inadequacy, which in turn became another source of shame. Other students who disclosed the abuse to their families were re-victimized by their families' refusal to believe the priest in question could do such a thing. Some may also feel guilty or sinful for accurately perceiving a priest's sexual intentions towards them, thinking, "How can I think such evil thoughts about a priest who is a man of God?"

*I believe God has a twisted sense of humor and he uses me for his amusement.*

Another aspect of spiritual wounding is the experience of feeling forsaken by God. Victims ask, "How could God have allowed this to happen if He truly cares?" This is highly significant for young men of thirteen and fourteen who were attending the seminary out of a strong desire to lead a life in service to God. Sadly, most of the men we talked to had rejected the Catholic Church and a God they felt had abandoned them. One man stated, "I believe God has a twisted sense of humor and he uses me for his amusement." In some instances, those who were the most desirous of emulating priests were the most trusting, and thus, the most vulnerable. Students who came from families where the Church was the hub of their lives, who invited priests into their homes as friends, appeared to have been unable to be objective enough to question a priest's actions. They seemed to "normalize" such behavior by thinking it must be all right if a priest suggested it. Only later in life did some students who received back rubs from

priests, after lights-out, recognize their sexual nature. They remember the tension in the room, that the priest was acting or breathing strangely, and a feeling that something might happen, although they did not know what it might be. These were not fond or pleasant memories of affection, but rather memories of a confusing and frightening ritual that they prayed would go away.

*I felt guilt and a crisis of conscience that I would have made a priest break his vows.*

As indicated previously, there was no predictable effect related to the type of abuse. What might seem to be nonintrusive events to many, e.g., episodes that did not involve genital touching, had a profound impact on some victims. One victim experienced a priest's sexual designs on him and became confused and guilt-ridden, resulting in a crisis of conscience. The student, not the priest, broke off the contact. Though fortunate to break away before overt sexual abuse took place, the student stated he felt guilt and a crisis of conscience that he could make "a priest break his vows." This is an example of the role reversal that takes place when there is abuse of any sort.

The belief that because the perpetrator is a man of God, sexual abuse must be the fault of the victim, is an illustration of the power that priests wield, and of the vulnerability of their victims. There is a special power a priest possesses by virtue of his position. The victim reasons that since a priest would never voluntarily break his vows, it must be he who tempted the priest and is guilty. For some, this can be sin for which there may be no forgiveness.

*For three months I planned my suicide to make it look like an accident to my family.*

A number of the former students have a history of suicide attempts. One man who was contacted by the Board was actually planning his suicide when he received the letter from the Board of Inquiry. He stated that if it were not for the persistent, continuous and personal effort of Ray Higgins, Board Coordinator, he would not be alive today. Another stated that he would put a pistol in his mouth night after night but could not bring himself to pull the trigger.

*How can I bring a child into a world this unsafe?*

One of the crippling aspects of sexual abuse is the development of a "victim mentality," a view of oneself and the world that continues long after the abuse ends. This may involve feeling as powerless, helpless and worthless in present-day situations as during the abuse. Some victims also transfer the character of the offenders onto the rest of the world (the world is not safe; it is dangerous and unpredictable) or onto the gender of the perpetrator ("all men will hurt me") or onto all clergy ("all priests are offenders"). Victims may believe that everyone is like the perpetrator ("If I can't trust a priest, then who can I trust?").

A history of alcohol and drug abuse was prevalent among the victims. Many are still struggling with this as they try to numb the pain of sexual abuse. Other problems reported to the Board included difficulty managing anger, sexual compulsiveness, self-destructive behavior, depression, isolation, poor self-concept, dissociative behavior. The Board is aware of two student victims who later committed sexual offenses themselves. While most victims of abuse do not become perpetrators, molestation is found in the histories of offenders at a much

higher rate than for non-offenders. In summary, the Board found that for most of the victims it interviewed, the aftermath of sexual abuse is this: the pain and confusion from sexual violation at St. Anthony's is long lasting, traumatic, and caused many victims to adopt extremely unhealthy and isolating behaviors in attempting to cope with their experience.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that another effect that we observed is the phenomenon Keith Mar, M.F.C.C. and Kathleen Baggarley, M.F.C.C. have characterized as the "Black Hole Theory." The men interviewed by the Board were mostly in their thirties or older, and had gone through enough painful life experiences to realize that the effects of their abuse were persistent and unavoidable. We believe that many, if not most, younger men seem to fall into a "black hole," i.e., for a time they feel strong enough to leave the abuse behind them or deny it altogether. It is significant that the men in their twenties who did contact us did so only because of continued personal outreach and support by family members involved with the Greater Community or fellow seminarians. Only a few men in their twenties responded to our mass mailings. We suspect that there are other students, as yet unidentified, who will come forward only when they are ready and able to begin dealing with the effects of their abuse. One of the main functions of the permanent board will be to help them when their time comes.

### One Student's Experience

*This student tried to detach himself during the abuse by watching the brightly colored aquarium fish in the darkened room where the molestations occurred. It happened frequently during the entire school year. The abuse preyed on his mind and he could not concentrate. His grades dropped, and he began to hate everything about the seminary, until finally one morning, he could not take it any longer. He threw a shoe at the wake-up bell, got into trouble and quit. He has never recovered his self-esteem, and to this day, in spite of the fact that he is a successful contractor, he still considers himself a failure.*

*After leaving the seminary, this student abused drugs, had problems with priests, religious leaders, college teachers and others in authority.*

*He continues to have problems with severe depression, substance abuse, and self-destructive behavior. He had planned his suicide because of his feelings of failure and low self-esteem, working out a way to make his death appear accidental to his wife and children.*

*He is now undergoing therapy and recently stated that he is trying to accept himself for who he is today; not who he might have been.*

*At present, this man is a very spiritual person, but he has totally rejected Catholicism.*



### Another Student's Experience

*This student stated that he went into St. Anthony's as a happy young boy, but left as a confused and angry young man, who did not know why until he remembered being molested.*

*After leaving the St. Anthony's, he was very rebellious and could not contain his rage. Around age 23 or 24 he began to get into fights in bars, seemingly unable to leave a bar without hitting someone.*

*He has abused himself with drugs, including shooting cocaine, and continues to drink a lot. He has problems with severe depression and has attempted suicide on many occasions.*

*He cannot seem to trust anyone and as a consequence, is not successful in relationships. He has a son from a failed relationship. When he gets into a relationship, he becomes distrustful and jealous. He also has difficulty relating to his parents and gets into a fight with them almost every time he visits.*

*He has questioned his sexual orientation in the past because of his relationship problems, feeling that he must be gay. At one time he considered "chucking it all" and adopting a homosexual lifestyle. He is now glad that he did not because he is able to understand the source of his sexual confusion.*

*This student is currently in therapy paid for by the Province and is making a valiant effort to straighten out his life.*

### Summary of Effects on Victims

*Not every victim had all the problems listed below, but each was experienced by one or more of the St. Anthony's students abused by friars.*

1. *Feelings of anger*
2. *Rejection of authority*
  - a. *Blaming of parents*
  - b. *General distrust of men*
3. *Memory repression*
4. *Difficulty concentrating*
5. *Depression*
6. *Low self-esteem and achievement*
  - a. *Academic difficulties at St. Anthony's*
  - b. *Difficulty completing college*
  - c. *Feeling of failure no matter how successful years later*
7. *Damaged self-concept*
  - a. *Self-hatred*
  - b. *Feelings of unmanliness*
  - c. *Loss of innocence*
8. *Loss of spirituality*
  - a. *Rejection of Catholicism*
  - b. *Rejection of God*
9. *Alcoholism and drug abuse*
10. *Doubts about sexuality*
11. *Difficulty with personal relationships*
  - a. *Inability to maintain serious relationships*
  - b. *Broken marriages*
12. *A few victims' becoming perpetrators*
13. *Dissociative behavior*
14. *Suicidal ideation and attempts*