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Book Review: Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture

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This book by Dr. Marie Keenan, Lecturer in the School of Applied Social Science in University College Dublin, represents a comprehensive, well researched and well-articulated analysis of the issue of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Keenan is uniquely positioned to offer such an analysis: as a social worker and systemic psychotherapist, she brings a broad perspective to the issue, drawing on extensive experience working therapeutically with clerical sex offenders, involvement with the Catholic Church in Ireland in developing child protection measures, and doctoral research on the experiences of clerical offenders.

Keenan casts a critical eye: on the discipline of psychology for situating explanatory theories of abuse within individual characteristics of the abuser; on the church for its dysfunctional power culture and inadequate training or seminary formation processes; on the bishops for their conformity to the institutional church when dealing with complaints of abuse; on hierarchical structures in Rome for their canonical dictates, the requirement of secrecy in the conduct of canonical trials and the absence of any reference to civil authorities where the rights of the accused prevailed; on the popes (both past and present) for their lack of guidance and support; and on society's reliance on the legal system engendering a culture of litigation rather than a culture of understanding and healing.

While acknowledging the role of individual agency in influencing behaviour, Keenan emphasises the role of institutional context and power structures within the church in understanding the emotional and contextual factors that led people (perpetrators and those responsible for them) to make 'bad judgements'. Keenan argues that the Catholic Church is unique when compared to other organisations in several respects: its pattern of ministry, governance, and attitude to sexuality, thus providing the rationale for investigation of the organizational factors that contribute to child sexual abuse as a psychosocial phenomenon. In doing so she attempts to bring to centre stage a discussion of culture and socialisation in her theoretical deliberations as to why people sexually abuse children.

Keenan suggests that the sexual abuse of minors in the church context is part of a bigger problem of celibate sexuality for the church. Catholic moral teaching and catholic sexual ethics, with its emphasis on control and the regulation of sexuality as central to the governance of the church (and its flock) is found lacking. Research findings that up to 50% of clergy are reported to be sexually active at any one time, underscores her argument that celibacy is not only unhealthy but unachievable. Many factors are

identified as setting the institutional context for abuses of power and sexuality in the church. These include: secrecy within clericalism, intolerance of mistakes, belief in the superiority of the ordained over the laity, lack of communication, lack of accountability at every level (especially at the level of the bishops and the pope) and the demand for blind loyalty at all levels of the ecclesiastical power structure. Formation or 'training' in seminaries with a value system of compliance and deference (rather than autonomy and honesty) and the ensuing culture of silence and secrecy contributes, in Keenan's view, to the occurrence of sexual abuse. An overly intellectualised moral education during formation leaves priests ill-equipped to deal with life's demands in making good moral judgements.

The role of power in the church is analysed, whereby priests are seen as owing obedience to those in authority but having no accountability to others. According to Keenan, the lack of supervision and accountability inherent in the power structure within the church has been a breeding ground for misuses and abuses of power. Clericalism and the ontological changes that take place during formation and at ordination clearly distinguish the priest from the laity and lead to two models of church: a church for the people and a church for the clergy. This dualism inevitably led to an over identification of the church with the ordained, contributing to a misplaced loyalty to the church rather than to the people it serves. In Keenan's own research with male clerical and religious offenders, the relative power of the ordained over the laity co-existed with a personal powerlessness, lack of autonomy, lack of a voice in decisions that affected their daily lives, loneliness and frustration. She portrays the modern priest as caught between the secularized world that values sexual freedom and sexual expression and a clerical world with its inadequate training, supervision or support. They are consequently left alone to find meaning in life in an arena of unregulated public power.

Keenan proposes a theoretical taxonomy of masculinity to help understand how priests and religious cope with the demands of adhering to church teaching and regulation and having one's own needs met – emotional, spiritual, sexual, social and in particular the need for intimacy. Keenan argues that priests and religious find other ways of managing the conflicting demands on their identity – for instance, through sexual relationships with other adults, often in the context of an emotionally abusive relationship. Sexual abuse within the Catholic Church is seen as a breakdown of relationships within a gendered context of power relations, organizational culture, theological deliberation and social conditions. Her thesis is that sexual abuse is inevitable given the landscape she has portrayed in her analysis. Although she herself poses the question at several times throughout the book, one is still left with: why is it that so few priests and religious abuse children in proportion to the 'lay' population? If the seminary training, the dysfunctional power culture, the secrecy surrounding sexuality and masculinity pervade the daily lives of the ordained, why then is the problem not even more prominent? Perhaps contrary to Keenan's argument, it is the seminary training that for some priests represented a good training ground for making good judgements. Keenan refers to research that clergy who as seminarians received explicit human formation preparation seem to have been less likely to abuse than those who did not receive such training and that non-offending priests were more likely to seek help than those who offended.

Nevertheless Keenan offers us hope. In particular she calls for a critical theology and a multi-level relational approach to therapy and rehabilitation that moves society towards a model of transformative justice to bring real healing incorporating hope, reconciliation and repair. She calls for a new model of church, one that replaces control, laws and regulations with one of shared beliefs and communal ministry. She challenges the church for its lack of compassion in the present for those who have offended and views the inadequate handling of abuse by Irish bishops not so much a cover up (as popular opinion would suggest) but as 'mistakes, misplaced loyalty and errors of judgement'. She points out that the 'us and them' blame culture prevalent (both within and towards the church) is unhelpful when trying to understand the phenomenon and work towards a future where children will be safer.

Interspersed throughout the book, she offers her own personal and professional insights, inviting the reader to engage in intelligent open-minded critical reflection on difficult and challenging issues. The book is a gem, a carefully constructed piece of Irish social history that also offers precious insights for the global church.