

Is therapy the new religion?

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Following the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Dallas, how can the child abuse scandal plaguing the Vatican be explained?

Although allegations of minor abuse by priests have emerged from Ireland to Australia, it is in the U.S. that they have spiraled into a crisis. So most explanations have focused on aspects of American culture.

The leading Catholic newspaper, *Avvenire*, has argued that the U.S. is in the hands of lawyers. Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga told the Italian magazine *Trenta Giorni* that the American media is to blame. The U.S. media were also the prime targets of Father Giovanni Marchesi, writing in the Vatican-approved *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

Legal compensation became prevalent between the 1950s and 1980s in America. As trust in leading institutions has declined, people have sought to resolve grievances legally instead of through bodies like churches. "The church itself is viewed with distrust," stated Pope John Paul II when he summoned American Cardinals to the Vatican in April to discuss the abuse crisis.

In a general climate of mistrust, social relations have become more formalized through the law. Litigation has widened from physical harm to psychological distress. Trauma and loss of self-esteem are now considered legitimate reasons for compensation.

This has been reinforced by the pro-therapy culture that has swept across the U.S. since the late 1960s. The Child Abuse Prevention, Treatment and Adoption Reform Act was first passed through Congress in 1974 and expanded in the 1980s. The Parents Anonymous program, based on therapeutic practices, also began in 1974 and has become the nation's largest child abuse program.

Between 1968 and 1983, the number of clinical psychologists in America more than tripled. There are now more therapists than fire fighters or mail carriers and twice as many therapists as dentists or pharmacists. James Nolan refers to therapists and psychologists as "a new priestly class," in "The Therapeutic State," (1998) saying they have replaced religious leaders as the authoritative community figures.

So the influence of litigation and the therapeutic culture cannot be separated from the declining authority of traditional religions. While faced with a financial crisis following the child abuse claims, it is the moral collapse of the Catholic Church that is more serious.

This collapse has been most evident regarding sexual relations. The rates of extramarital sex and divorce are now higher among Catholics than Protestants in the U.S. Numerous campaigns in favor of accepting homosexuality as well as female and married priests have undermined the Catholic Church's authority.

Many Catholics are violating confession by receiving Communion without confessing their sexual transgressions. The Catholic confession has been increasingly replaced by confessions to therapists, including alleged sexual abuse claims against priests.

During the recent crisis in the U.S., four bishops resigned, nearly 250 priests resigned or were suspended and at least 300 civil lawsuits against church officials were filed.

For sex offenders that are jailed, individual states can now force those who want to keep their privileges into therapy, according to a ruling by the Supreme Court on June 10.

Such therapeutic solutions assume a bleaker view of humanity than the Christian notion of fallen man, where redemption sustains the hope of transcendence.

In the therapeutic mindset, counseling will help abusive individuals, but they will remain damaged for life. However, it is even worse when this outlook is extended to the victims with the conviction that abuse causes lifelong psychological harm and can create a cycle of further abuse.

The Italian Catholic media have blamed the American media and legal system. Their failure to criticize the therapeutic culture suggests their adoption of its premises.

Indeed, the Bishops' Charter approved at the Dallas Conference on June 14 includes therapeutic solutions for the American Catholic Church. Article 1 promises the "provision of counseling" for victims. Article 5 specifies that priests or deacons who are subject to allegations of sexual abuse will undergo "psychological evaluation."

In addition, guidelines governing relations between priests and minors have been widely suggested. These will bring more therapists and counselors into the church for supervision. Richard Sipe, a former priest turned psychotherapist, has counseled hundreds of clergymen.

The dominance of therapeutic culture in the U.S. explains why the majority of child abuse accusations have emerged there. The litigious character of America has contributed to these accusations developing into legal claims. Powerful media have increased the pressure to settle out of court to

limit bad publicity, but such weak defense strategies may have encouraged further claims.

Contrary to public perceptions linked to financial windfalls, litigation does not empower the claimants who become dependent on the lawyers. With the added lifelong intervention of therapists, the abused risk indefinite identities as victims and losing the opportunity to try and rebuild their lives independently.

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