intersections

Article

Confronting Sexual Abuse in Sacred Spaces

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A special issue of the award-winning online magazine

> ***By . . . . 2018, stories about abusive priests had become both routine and shocking—routine in that Americans were accustomed to such reports, and shocking in that there seemed no end to new revelations about abusive clergy and the institutions that protected them.***
>
> ***—Brett Krutzsch, The Revealer***

In March 2020, *The Revealer* published its first special issue, "*Religion & Sex Abuse Within and Beyond the Catholic Church*." The series included examinations of sex abuse in Protestant, Jewish, and Hindu religious communities but began with the Catholic Church because "the crisis remains a profound problem in this particular institution." In his Editor's Letter, Brett Krutzsch argued that "even after countless victim testimonies, grand jury reports, and lawsuits, the Church has still not sufficiently dealt with the crisis."

Catholic Sex Abuse: Growing Consciousness of a Centuries-Old Problem

Wherever there is institutional power, sexual abuse is often perpetrated by those who wield that power. This truth is particularly disturbing when the institutions in question claim to do holy work in sacred spaces. The Catholic Church is one of those institutions that has struggled to reckon with systemic abuse of parishioners and minors since its early history. In 1051, for instance, Gregorian monk Peter Damian wrote extensively about abuses perpetrated by the clergy in his treatise *Book of Gomorrah*, including the sexual abuse of children. With the development of modern journalistic tools, this problem has come closer and closer to the foreground of public consciousness.



Vatican City. Source: Simon Hurry via Unsplash.

Beginning in the 1980s, media coverage of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church increased dramatically, and in the 1990s calls for Pope John Paul II to acknowledge abuse culminated in criticisms of the pontiff by victims' advocates and celebrities. Beginning in 2002, the *Boston Globe* published a series of investigative articles on abuses by the Boston Archdiocese—a series that won the paper the Pulitzer Prize. Under pressure, the Church issued official statements condemning particular instances of abuse but fell far short of addressing it as a systemic problem—in some cases, emphasizing homosexuality as the problem rather than the abuse of religious power. In fact, the three most recent pontiffs – John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis – have each been criticized for failing to address the crisis both as popes and during their pre-papal careers.

Building on the work of journalistic and academic investigations in the early 2000s, state officials in the United States have launched their own investigations. The office of the

Pennsylvania Attorney General released a report in 2018 identifying more than 300 perpetrators and 1,000 victims. After that report, twenty other state attorneys general launched similar investigations. Most recently, the Attorney General of Illinois released a report in 2023. Over the past four decades, the list of victims has grown to levels that are difficult to comprehend. And, given what we now know about the historic scope of the crisis, the number of Catholic clergy who have been formally prosecuted for sex abuse remains implausibly small.

Five of the eight articles of this special issue examine the Catholic sex abuse scandal. They include:

- "The Problem with Spotlights: Rethinking Our Response to Clergy Sexual Abuse" by Brian Clites
- "Priests that Moved: Catholicism, Colonized Peoples, and Sex Abuse in the U.S. Southwest" by Kathleen Holscher
- "Black Catholics, Racism, and the Sex Abuse Crisis: A Personal Reflection" by Tia Noelle Pratt
- "On Forgiveness, Clergy Abuse, and the Need for New Understandings" by Kaya Oakes
- "American Catholic Studies: Forum on Catholic Sex Abuse and the Study of Religion" by Matthew Cressler and Jessica Byrne

Before the 2020 special issue, *The Revealer* also published the special column "Political Feelings: Soul Murder" in 2018 by Paul Blanchfield in response to the Pennsylvania Attorney General's report, which was released that year.



Source: Saif71.com via Unsplash.

Sex Abuse Beyond the Catholic Church

> ***[T]he Catholic Church is far from the only religious institution that has protected abusive religious leaders instead of the people who put their trust in them. Too often, exclusive focus on the Catholic Church has led us to overlook problems of sexual abuse elsewhere and, worse, to assume other religious communities are inherently safer than Catholic ones.***

> —***Brett Krutzsch, The Revealer***

In addition to its coverage of sexual violence in the Catholic Church, *The Revealer* published three contributions that interrogated abuse in Protestant, Jewish, and Hindu communities. They are:

- "A History of Sex Abuse in the Protestant Imagination" by Suzanna Krivulskaya
- "Jews, Sex Positivity, and Abuse" by Sarah Imhoff
- "The Guru-Disciple Relationship and the Complications of Consent" by Amanda Lucia