

The Sexual Abuse Crisis

Subjects: Religion

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The sexual abuse crisis that has rocked the Catholic Church in recent decades has resulted in one major unintended casualty: creating a skeptical distance in the relationship between adult leaders and youth.

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1. A Brief History of the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis in the United States

In its over 2000-year history, the Roman Catholic Church has had many challenges and conflicts, both external and internal, that have reshaped the course of human history. One such date that rocked the Church to its core was 6 January 2002, and effects can still be felt today. On that date, the Feast of the Epiphany, the Boston Globe published a devastating investigative report exposing hundreds of allegations of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests and brothers over several decades within the United States of America. Within days, reports of child sex abuse appeared in every major newspaper, magazine, and television in the United States and international media ^[1]. These reports became the catalyst for victims across the country to file lawsuits against the Catholic Church. Numerous state laws were passed that extended the statute of limitations for sex abuse cases, and judgments against (arch)dioceses and religious orders amounted to over one billion dollars, causing several Catholic dioceses to file for bankruptcy and Chapter 11 protection ^[1].

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), an assembly of the United States hierarchy, acted quickly to provide “damage control”. At their annual general meeting in June 2002 in Dallas, Texas, the Bishops promulgated the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, commonly known as the Dallas Charter. This charter is a comprehensive set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy and includes guidelines for the prevention of future acts of abuse. In addition, the USCCB created two entities to address the problem of child sexual abuse, including the National Review Board and the Committee on Child and Youth Protection. These two entities shared the mandate of assisting each (arch)diocese and eparchy in implementing a “safe environment” program to ensure safety and security for all children as they participate in Church and religious activities; developing an appropriate compliance audit mechanism to assist (arch)bishops and eparchs in adhering to the Charter; and preparing an annual public report of compliance for each (arch)diocese and eparchy ^[2].

2. Impact of the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis on Catholic Youth Ministry

The sex abuse crisis had broad implications for parishes and (arch)dioceses/eparchies across the United States. As previously stated, every (arch)diocese/eparchy in the US had to develop a “safe environment” program and implement background checks for all adult volunteers, staff, and clergy working with minors. Since 2002 and especially right after the summer of 2018, in many (arch)dioceses/eparchies, the pendulum swung to one side. Sometimes these policies become burdensome and inhibited effective youth ministry. No empirical studies are available examining the role of the sex abuse crisis on youth ministry. However, there are many anecdotal stories of youth ministers across the US on how the crisis has impacted their ministry. A few authors have included the topic in scholarly writings. One such person is Robert Rice who, in 2016, completed a doctoral dissertation titled *Revising the Vision: A critique of how evangelization was articulated in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Framework for Catholic youth ministry (Renewing the Vision, 1997) in light of related magisterial documents and the history of youth and Catholic youth ministry in the United States*. Dr. Rice presented three specific ways in which the sex abuse scandal negatively impacted the Catholic youth ministry. In addition to a lack of trust, loss of staff, and loss of resources due to payouts of lawsuits, Dr. Rice felt that the final reason was that some safe environment policies hurt adult/teen relationships.

3. Developmental Relationships Framework

The Life Teen model is a good starting point; however, a more comprehensive model for relational ministry can be found in Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework, first published in 2014. Built upon the work and research of the Developmental Assets Framework, first published in 1990, the Developmental Relationships Framework consists of five elements expressed in specific actions that make relationships powerful in young people's lives. Youth ministers and adults working with youth should focus on these five elements.

1. Express care or show that the youth matters to you. This can be reinforced by being dependable, listening, believing in youth, being warm, and being encouraging. The adult leader should focus attention on the young person when he or she is talking about things that are important to him or her and make an effort to understand the young person's point of view. If the adult leader cannot deliver on a promise, then that person should apologize.
2. Challenge growth and push the youth to keep getting better. This can be accomplished by expecting youth to live up to their potential, stretching youth to go further, holding young people accountable, and helping youth reflect on failures. Adult leaders should talk with a young person about the positive things he or she has to look forward to in the future, teach young people that making mistakes is part of learning, and require young people to take responsibility if they do something wrong.
3. Provide support to help youth complete tasks and achieve goals. The youth leader should model the values, attitudes, and behaviors that you want young people to follow, praise young people for their hard work, regardless of if they succeed or fail, and encourage young people to try things they might be interested in.
4. Share power and treat the youth with respect. It is imperative that the adult respect young people, collaborate with young people, and let them lead. Part of this process is to respect a young person's opinion even when you might disagree. If there is a disagreement, take time to understand each other's point of view, and the adult should be open to changing his or her opinion.
5. Expand possibilities and connect the youth with people and places that broaden their world. Adult leaders should be inspiring youth, broadening young people's horizons, and connecting with them. Introduce young people to new music, art, or activities. Youth leaders should introduce young people to other trustworthy adults who have a similar hobby or interest. Lastly, young people should be introduced to ideas or cultures that are different from their experiences.

Like the Developmental Assets Framework, the Developmental Relationships Framework is rooted in research whereby over 60,000 young people were included in testing and evaluating the concept. However, given the short amount of time the Developmental Relationships Framework has existed, there is still a lot of research to be conducted around the long-term effectiveness of the Framework. Indeed, the Search Institute, supported by the Lilly Endowment, is currently engaged in a research project exploring faith-nurturing relationships in diverse faith communities. Launched in the summer of 2018, the research team is currently examining faith-nurturing relationships young people experience in their congregations, families, and communities through qualitative studies in 12 congregations. They plan to identify relational practices that are particularly catalytic for faith or spiritual formation that can be more intentionally and inclusively nurtured in and through faith communities.

With the USCCB's inclusion and promotion of the Developmental Assets Framework in "Renewing the Vision", it seems logical for those working with young people in the US Catholic Church to learn more about the Developmental Relationships Framework and consider adopting the Framework to guide youth ministry in parishes. The late Peter L. Benson, the creator of the Developmental Assets Framework, once stated: "After decades of forming hypotheses, conducting surveys, crafting and rewriting definitions, analyzing data, and writing journal articles, the Search Institute researchers and practitioners have arrived at a surprisingly simple conclusion: nothing—*nothing*—has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships."

While safe environment policies exist for the critical purpose of keeping youth safe, adoption and incorporation of the Developmental Relationships Framework into youth ministry programs provide ministers and volunteers with tangible action items to develop healthy and caring relationships with young people. Perhaps the adoption of the Framework by the Catholic Church at the parish, diocesan, and even national level is a step in the direction of ensuring "protection and prevention" meets "practical and pastoral" while at the same time providing greater equilibrium so that the pendulum does not sway to either extreme. Research has shown that our young people need caring adult role models in their lives, and while the sexual abuse scandal has negatively impacted healthy relational youth ministry, adopting the Developmental Relationships Framework is one possible way forward.

References

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