Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity among Clergy: How Spiritual Directors can Help in the Context of Seminary Formation

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As the Church looks toward the future, it must invest in prevention of sex addiction and abuse by its clergy and focus, in particular, on the sexual education and personal development of seminarians and those who participate in their formation. This article investigates four ways seminary communities can develop effective methods of preventing further sexual abuse by clergy and emphasizes the critical components of formation programs and the role of the spiritual director.

During a spiritual direction session a young seminarian once told his spiritual director, “You see, Father, as a seminarian studying to become a priest in the Catholic Church, I think I will have no problem with the vows of poverty and obedience, but as far as the vow of chastity is concerned, I am already having a hard time with it. I still feel attracted to beautiful women, and I very often have these dreams and fantasies about them. I don’t think I will be able to be a good priest if I keep thinking and dreaming about women.”

The spiritual director responded, “Well, my son, I can empathize with what you are telling me. I just turned 83 two weeks ago and I can honestly say that only now do I feel safe from the temptations of sinning against my vow of chastity. Do not lose heart; I have been there, too.” The young seminarian felt somewhat reassured and as the session ended he was in a more comfortable place with regard to his vow of chastity.

The following morning as soon as he entered the dining hall for breakfast, his spiritual director pulled him aside and asked him, “Tell me son, how old did I say you must be before you become immune from having impure thoughts about women?”

“Well, you told me 83, Father,” was the reply.

“Make it 84,” said the spiritual director.

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Within the last few years an explosion of media attention has been paid to clergy sex abuse, an issue that quietly lived within the Church for decades but that can no longer be ignored. Not only have priests been exposed as pedophiles and ephebophiles, but they are being confronted for their participation in a broader range of unhealthy sexual behaviors and addictions. Research suggests that an estimated 50% of vowed celibates live non-celibate lifestyles in either long-term, committed partnerships or short-term relationships (Sipe, 1995). Staggering incidences of child sexual abuse by priests in North America have brought the relevance of celibacy into question and have led to a decline in its endorsement. In response to sexual scandals, the church initially dealt with the crisis by sending the accused to treatment programs for priests with alcohol problems and sexual issues and by making monetary settlements with victims. Other actions now include outlining detailed steps for dealing with clergy who have been accused of sexual misconduct, removing priest abusers from their ministries, contacting authorities, and most recently implementing mandatory, nationwide programs that alert not only priests but laity as well to the signs of possible sexual abuse of minors.

The majority of these intervention responses occur after the abuse has been perpetrated and children or adolescents have been traumatized. However, as any doctor knows, treating the symptoms is not a cure for the disease. The best medicine is often practiced in prevention and education. As the Church looks toward the future, it must invest in prevention of sex addiction and abuse by its clergy and focus in particular on the education and personal development of seminarians and those who participate in their formation. Blanchard and Tabachnick (2002) recommend four ways for individuals, communities, and governments to increase awareness of sexual health, provide interventions that promote sexually responsible behaviors, and support research on sexual health. Their suggestions include the following: early detection, diagnosis, and treatment; grassroots education; consumer involvement; and organizational response. Using these recommendations as a guide, this article investigates how seminary communities can develop effective methods of preventing further sexual abuse by clergy, with an emphasis on formation programs and the critical role of the spiritual director.

EARLY DETECTION, DIAGNOSIS, AND TREATMENT: SCREENING IN SEMINARIES

Prior to the exposure of sexual misconduct by clergy, a man’s emotional and psychological health was not normally investigated when he entered the seminary. Indeed, for years, sex and sexuality were topics not openly discussed with future priests (Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002). While seminarians were taught that celibacy was a charism and gift as well as a requirement of the priesthood, they were often left to figure out on their
own how to live the life-time commitment of celibacy or were guided in ways of avoiding and denying the temptation to act on their sexual drives. Not having had adequate spiritual direction addressing sexuality or academic courses on human sexuality, some priests may never have had the opportunity to explore their own sexuality and may not have learned in the seminary how to accept themselves as sexual beings or deal with sexual urges openly and appropriately (Gregoire & Jungers, 2003).

Two incidents drove the church to reevaluate its seminary formation programs in the early 1990s. First, the case of serial pedophile Fr. Porter of the diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts drew attention to sexual abuse in the church not only among the general public, but also among the fraternity of priests. Second, in 1992, Pope John Paul II issued a statement in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* that the formation of priests must be reorganized to focus on four areas—human, intellectual, pastoral, and spiritual—and include a more open dialogue of sexuality and celibacy (Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002).

In response to these events, seminary rectors and church hierarchy implemented a system for detecting the presence of psychological illness in candidates desiring to study for the priesthood. Before they are admitted to the seminary, men are now required to undergo extensive screening. All candidates must participate in a series of written and projective psychological tests such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory–2 (MMPI–2) and Rorschach and submit to two interviews with a psychologist (MMPI–2, 1989; Exner, 2001). Bishops and seminary rectors may only accept candidates who, through testing and interview results, appear to be psychologically and psychosexually healthy. Furthermore, during the course of their formation, seminarians are evaluated twice a year to ensure they are meeting the requirements for proper human, pastoral, academic, and spiritual development (Coleman, 2001). Johansen (2003) reports that some seminaries also have considered using the Sexual History Survey developed by Rev. Stephen Rossetti as a tool for identifying problematic sexual behaviors in candidates, though none have officially adopted the survey as part of their admittance process.

**GRASSROOTS EDUCATION: TRANSFORMING FORMATION PROGRAMS**

Screening candidates is part of a prevention plan whose goal is to ensure that future priests are of sound mental and sexual health. However, as Blanchard and Tabachnick (2002) described, another key component of prevention is grassroots education, which entails using professionals in the area of sex addiction to facilitate dialogue on the issue of sexual health. It is especially in this area that much potential exists for creating highly effective
educational programs on sexuality, intimacy, celibacy, and peripheral issues such as setting boundaries, appropriate behaviors, and legal and ethical issues surrounding sexual misbehavior. Education is beneficial for both seminarians and spiritual directors who participate in seminarians’ spiritual and personal formation.

Grounds for More Education for Seminarians

Priests themselves have indicated the need for further education on human sexuality in a survey distributed by The Kansas Star to all dioceses in the United States except one. The Star received 801 responses from the 3,013 surveys it issued. In a question asking what the Church can do to deal with priests’ needs and concerns regarding HIV and AIDS in the clergy, about 93% of respondents believed that providing more education in the seminaries on sexual issues would be an effective response to this issue (Thomas, 1999). While this article is not concerned with the issues of HIV and AIDS in the clergy, this statistic is telling because it indicates that clergy believe there is a lack of education around sexual issues in the seminary.

Additional support for increased education comes from Francis and Turner (1995), who examined the characteristics of perpetrators of sexual misconduct in the church and described a group of clergy who “victimize through a lack of insight into boundary issues and power abuse” (p. 220). Unable to see the difference between normal behaviors and misconduct, these clergy may schedule meetings with parishioners at odd hours such as late at night, hug or touch parishioners in ways that can be interpreted as sexual, and in general work to reduce any power differential between themselves and their congregation. The authors suggested that these perpetrators are fundamentally healthy individuals (and thus may not have raised any concerns to bishops or rectors during their screening process) who “can often be helped by appropriate education, supervision, and short-term counseling” (Francis & Turner, 1995, p. 220).

Seminaries do appear to be making some provisions for more open dialogue about sexuality. Students are required to take a course on human sexuality, as well as attend workshops on sexuality, celibacy, and sexual abuse (Coleman, 2001). When such workshops, courses, or conferences are being designed, seminaries must offer information from more than a theological and moral perspective. Presentations on the theology of the body or sexual ethics courses can inform the intellect of seminarians on church orthodoxy, but they probably will not address the need for dialogue about the lived-experience of celibacy or promote discussion or individual reflection by seminarians about their sexual histories and current levels of comfort with their sexuality. Professionals who are knowledgeable in the areas of sex abuse, sex addiction treatment, and healthy sexuality would be extremely helpful in providing seminarians with this type of dialogue.
Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity among Clergy

As seminaries continue to develop educational programs around sexuality, they would do well to compose a set of objectives for students who complete the trainings. In the Clergy Sexuality Survey (CSS) (Delmonico, Laaser, & Gufstason, 2004), clergy were asked to evaluate the training they had in a variety of areas related to issues of sexuality. Using the areas outlined in the CSS, rectors might ask whether seminarians:

- Learned to maintain professional boundaries with parishioners, colleagues, and staff
- Learned ethical and professional issues associated with sex with parishioners, colleagues, staff
- Learned how to handle difficult sexual situations
- Learned about general sexuality
- Learned about general sexual boundary issues
- Learned what to do when in a sexually compromising situation
- Learned how to discuss sexuality with parishioners
- Learned healthy sexual boundaries with children
- Learned what to do if in “sexual trouble"

Education for Spiritual Directors

Alerting future priests to the differences between healthy and unhealthy sexuality is one element of a formation program aimed at preventing sexual addictions from developing in secret in seminaries. A second component deals with alerting spiritual directors about these same issues. Education can raise seminarians’ level of awareness about a variety of sexual issues. However, becoming educated does not guarantee that seminarians will feel free to discuss concerns about personal sexual issues with their superiors or formation directors. Talking about sexual issues is difficult for lay people and may be even more so for future priests, who, “it seems... by virtue of their role in society are not to have any sexuality” (Francis & Turner, 1995, p. 219). The only individual many seminarians will feel comfortable approaching with questions or worries about their sexual health is their spiritual director (Rafferty, 2002). This places spiritual directors in a critical position for providing intervention for seminarians who exhibit signs of sexual addictions. Thus, reframing the classical role of the spiritual director in seminaries may be key in helping the church avoid future incidences of sexual misconduct, addictions, and ultimately scandals.

What is Spiritual Direction?

In the Christian tradition, spiritual direction is a unique relationship between two individuals in which one individual seeks out the other for guidance in
developing an intimate union with God. The special attention paid to the person’s relationship with God distinguishes spiritual direction from other experiences such as counseling, moral guidance, confession, preaching, or general pastoral ministry. Typically, spiritual direction is concerned with a person’s interior life more than his or her exterior life and is always mindful that the Spirit of God is part of the discourse in which the director and directee engage (Barry & Connolly, 1982; Nemeck & Coombs, 1985).

Without detracting from the traditional role spiritual directors take in helping seminarians deepen their relationship with God, it would be prudent for them to be well-informed about the signs of problematic sexual behaviors, sexual anorexia, and cyber-sex addictions. Because of the confidential nature of the spiritual direction relationship, seminarians who suspect that they have a sexual addiction might use this relationship as the one place where they begin to share their questions about their sexuality. Only when spiritual directors are educated about the signs of sexual addictions can they respond appropriately and promptly to their directees in this area.

Raising awareness about their own sexuality and personal issues around sex and sexuality is another reason education is important for spiritual directors. In modern times, the practice of spiritual direction is not the domain of priests alone. It has become a profession open to lay men and women who complete special training programs for spiritual direction. However, in the seminary environment, spiritual directors are most commonly priests who may or may not have had formal training in spiritual direction, but who nonetheless are recognized to be holy and devout individuals capable of providing spiritual guidance. It is not improbable that the clergy who direct seminarians may be uncomfortable discussing sexual issues with directees because of gaps in their own formation around sexuality. In order to effectively approach the topic of sexuality with directees, spiritual directors need to be comfortable with their own sexuality and desensitized enough to raise questions and challenge directees about their sexuality.

Identifying Problematic Sexual Behaviors, Addictions, and Sexual Anorexia

Teaching spiritual directors about sexual addictions and compulsivity should include key areas: signs of sexual deviance, problematic sexual behaviors, cybersex addiction, and sexual anorexia. First, a discussion of some red flags for sexual deviance.

Sexual Deviance or Misconduct

Although there is no foolproof way of identifying persons who will become child molesters, Rossetti (1996) suggested six characteristics that can be indicators for pedophilic adults. These characteristics include: (1) Confusion
about sexual orientation, (2) Childish interests or behavior, (3) Lack of peer relationships, (4) Extremes in developmental sexual experiences, (5) Personal history of childhood sexual abuse and/or deviant sexual experiences, and (6) An excessively passive, dependent, conforming, personality. In cases where enough red flags are present and sexual orientation toward minors seems likely, spiritual directors should refer their directees for professional evaluation.

Problematic Sexual Behaviors

Training spiritual directors to recognize signs of unhealthy sexuality would include education on the following categories of compulsive sexual behaviors (Carnes, 1991):

- Fantasy Sex: characterized by thinking or obsessing for large periods of time about sexual ventures or past, present, or future sexual acts.
- Seductive Role Sex: identified by many sexual relationships coinciding with each other or one after the other. People engaging in seductive role sex use seduction to gain power over others and feel good about themselves.
- Anonymous Sex: involves thoughts, fantasies or encounters with unknown individuals as well as the pursuit of anonymous individuals in public domains.
- Paying for Sex: involves paying for sexual activity such as a prostitute or escort, phone conversation or Internet sexual activity.
- Trading Sex: identified by engaging in sexual behaviors for some type of payment such as money or drugs
- Voyeuristic Sex: involves looking at others for sexual gratification, including pornography
- Exhibitionism: includes full or partial exposure in public areas, dressing or undressing in public areas and wearing revealing clothing
- Intrusive Sex: characterized by inappropriate intimate touching of others, telling sexually explicit stories or jokes or using a position of power (e.g., in the workplace) to coerce others into sexual activity.
- Pain Exchange: described by causing physical harm or emotional humiliation to a person during sexual activity in order to gain pleasure
- Object Sex: involves the use of objects for masturbation
- Exploitive Sex: characterized by exposing children to inappropriate sexual material, to adult sexual behaviors, or forcing sexual activity on an adult or child.

All of these addictive sexual behaviors also can manifest in Internet use or cybersex addiction. The recommendation for spiritual directors who suspect the presence of problematic sexual behaviors in their directees is the same as if they suspect a sexual deviance. Any seminarian who reveals that he
engages in these sex acts should be referred for professional evaluation and counseling.

Cybersex Addiction

Educating spiritual directors about the emerging disorder of cybersex addiction is particularly relevant with the popularity of Internet use today. One group highly susceptible to Internet addiction is college students who have unlimited access to being online and who are often required to do research online, correspond with professors, and register online (Rafferty, 2002). This susceptibility applies to seminarians as well because many of them are completing degrees in theology or philosophy during their formation years and have a pattern of Internet use very similar to the average college student. Spiritual directors should be concerned about seminarians who become withdrawn, increasingly tired, unable to fulfill obligations, or fail to meet academic standards after having academic success.

In order to do a more in depth analysis of a young man’s Internet use, spiritual directors might rely on Kimberly Young’s (1999) criteria for evaluating an Internet addiction. An affirmative response to five of the eight criteria would normally indicate an addiction. These criteria include: preoccupation with the Internet; increasing amounts of time spent on the Internet to feel satisfied; recurring attempts and failures to control or decrease Internet use; negative emotional response (such as depression) to attempts to cut back use; staying online longer than planned; jeopardizing work or education opportunities because of Internet use; and using the Internet as a form of escape.

Sexual Anorexia

One facet of unhealthy sexuality that might be easily overlooked in the seminary is sexual anorexia, defined by Carnes and Moriarity (1997) as “an obsessive state in which the physical, mental, and emotional task of avoiding sex dominates one’s life” (p. 1). In an environment that demands celibacy and has long looked scornfully at sex, it would not be surprising to see characteristics of sexual anorexia in seminarians. Among other things, sexual anorexics typically avoid anything sexual, have judgmental attitudes about their own and others’ sexuality, feel ashamed about sexual experiences, evade intimacy because of sexual fears, and manage painful life issues by maintaining an aversion to sex (Carnes & Moriarity, 1997). Spiritual directors must help their directees to clearly delineate the differences between celibacy and sexual anorexia. The former is a freely made, well-informed lifestyle choice that does not promote the characteristics of sexual anorexia as ways to “manage” a life of celibacy. The latter, lying at the opposite side of the spectrum from sexual addiction, is an illness in which individuals have a pathological fear of their own sexuality and vacillate between compulsively depriving themselves of sexual behavior and “bingeing” on sexual activity. Spiritual directors
can teach seminarians that sexuality is a fundamental part of humanity even for those who are celibate. Being alert to indications that the seminarian is developing a fear of his own sexuality will enable the spiritual director to open discussions about sexuality and challenge the student to refocus on how celibates can live a life of healthy sexuality without mimicking sexual anorexics’ beliefs and behavior patterns.

CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT: HOW SEX ADDICTS OR ABUSE SURVIVORS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SEMINARY FORMATION

Blanchard and Tabachnick (2002) recommend that prevention programs invite people who have been through treatment for sexual abuse or addiction to share their stories with the public. Including a “witness” talk as part of sexuality training can be an effective way for seminarians to make a connection to real persons who have struggled either with surviving abuse or overcoming a sexual addiction. Speakers need not be priest offenders or victims of abuse by a member of the clergy for their testimony to be impactful. Such talks can alert seminarians to victim awareness as well as help them recognize signs of a developing sex addiction.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSE

The final component recommended by Blanchard and Tabachnick (2002) for developing an effective prevention plan involves networking with the various resources that can offer input about sexual addiction and abuse. In the seminary community, this component is again a call to provide well-balanced education on human sexuality and sexual addictions. A moral and theological approach to education is important but does not reveal enough about the origins of unhealthy sexuality. There is a strong call for the seminary to utilize a variety of community resources so that seminarians’ formation does not take place in a “vacuum” where the only approach to understanding unhealthy sexuality is a moral one and the only response to sexual misconduct is confessing sexual sin.

CONCLUSION

There is a difference between being proactive and prevention minded and presuming the “guilt” of a particular community because of the behaviors of some members of that community. By embracing a prevention program that screens all candidates, provides broad-based sexuality, education, trains spiritual directors in the signs of unhealthy sexuality, and utilizes community resources, seminaries will begin to decrease the chances of clergy perpetrating abuse. A well-developed prevention program does not operate out of the
assumption that clergy are at high risk for sex addictions, but out of the belief that society in general—inclusive of men preparing for the priesthood—benefits from open discussions about healthy and unhealthy sexuality. The formation components that will be most accessible to seminarians and probably the most useful will be: (1) the workshops, classes, and conferences on sexuality and celibacy and (2) the spiritual direction relationship in which they can raise questions, doubts, and concerns about their sexuality or about celibacy.

REFERENCES


