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Addressing the Sex Abuse Crisis in Communities of Faith and Learning

Abstract

This paper argues that educational communities of faith and learning (e.g. Catholic colleges and universities) are especially primed to face into the pain and reality of the sex abuse crisis in honest and constructive ways. Citing the need for strategic collaboration between mental health professionals and religious educators, it calls for pedagogies which: are trauma-informed and utilize the insights of neuroscience; promote open dialogue in the face of organizational silence; foster safe and courageous spaces; attend to the dangerous memory and deep impacts which accompany survivors of the sex abuse. It argues that failure to address the sex abuse crisis with open and interdisciplinary discourse fosters a null curriculum that will only serve to have corrosive implications.

Introduction

"The Sex Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church: Reckoning, Repentance, and Renewal," was a three-day symposium held at my home institution in March 2019. The planning for this symposium began in Fall 2018, soon after the release of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report (2018) and the revelations about the extensive abuse by the defrocked Cardinal McCarrick as well as the actions of Bishops who participated in decades of cover-up about priests in their dioceses who were abusers. The college's Faculty Steering Committee for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition was deeply convinced that this topic deserved paramount attention if the institution was to maintain its integrity and to attend with honesty to the signs of the times in the church and in Catholic higher education. The symposium included presentations from journalists, theologians, therapists as well as scholars of English, Philosophy, History, and Criminal Justice. A spokesperson from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), the college's sponsoring religious community leader, and campus ministers helped to lead sessions. Award-winning Catholic journalist, author, and film maker, David Gibson, gave a keynote address. A prayer service for healing was held and more than 600 students attended eleven sessions.

In assessing its impact, the planning committee was very pleased with the program's breadth and scope but especially noted how exceedingly grateful faculty and staff were for the opportunity to engage in conversation about the painful topic of sex abuse in the church, a reality that so many have been affected by in some way or another. Colleagues from outside the college and parishioners in the local community echoed a tremendous sense of gratitude for this symposium while recognizing that the topic of sex abuse is simply not discussed enough. So much so, the significant number of notes and comments of appreciation for the symposium provoked in me a fundamental question which is at the heart of this paper: what took so long? Why did it take the disclosing of scandal in the highest levels of the church and the scathing

report of a state's grand jury to trigger the necessity of a conversation that seemed to have been put off for years?

Given the gravity of the issue, there is a perception that, despite some notable exceptions, analysis and dialogue of the sex abuse crisis in Catholic higher education circles has been somewhat sparse.[1] In religious education literature there is a dearth of analysis of this crisis and its impacts on teaching and learning in communities of faith. Why this apparent lacuna, especially in light of the pain the sex abuse crisis has inflicted? As a religious educator I seek to highlight the resources that may equip educators and ministers in communities of faith and learning to address the sex abuse crisis in informative and healing ways. In particular this paper argues that conversations about the sex abuse crisis in communities of faith and learning are strengthened by: 1) the implementation of a diversity of teaching languages; 2) education about trauma-informed religious education practices and theological insights; 3) gleaning key insights from neuroscience related to imagination, brain development and story-telling; 4) the development of strategic collaborations with mental health centers and, 5) the utilization of pedagogies that present sex abuse as a dangerous memory in the face of intractable amnesia and organizational silence.

Languages and Learning Spaces

First, languages of teaching and learning. To promote dialogue and healing, institutions of faith and learning must utilize the resources of a variety of teaching languages: homiletic, academic, aesthetic and therapeutic. The pain of the sex abuse crisis cannot be addressed by relying only on rationalistic speak. Kieran Scott (2001) unpacks a variety of teaching languages while suggesting that they all might contribute to more holistic learning in settings of religious education.[2] Certainly, the higher education setting is most accustomed to the academic manner of teaching. At the Iona College symposium (March 2019), academic analysis from an inter-disciplinarian lens shaped many of the presentations ranging from theology to religious studies. At the same time, there was recognition of the need for therapeutic language. Scott describes examples of such language as words and actions of mourning, healing, welcoming, and calming.[3] It is only fitting that attempts to educate about the sex abuse crisis provide space for people to express anger, voice confusion, vent frustration and to mourn for the pain of survivors and for the many who brought to their graves their silent suffering. A John Jay College study (Terry, Mercado, and Perillo 2008) reveals that about 4% (4,392) of all U.S. priests in ministry from 1950-2002, had serious allegations of sexually abusing a mean average of over 2.1 male and .48 female victims; these statistics do not include the numbers of other religious or lay

[1] The author recognizes the Boston College conference of February 2004 and the work of this institution's Church in the 21st Century center, and the on-going, pioneering work of Voices of the Faithful as well as other initiatives across the country which are exceptions to this observation.

[2] Kieran Scott , "To Teach Religion or Not to Teach Religion: Is that the Dilemma" In *Religious Education as Practical Theology*, ed, Bert Roebben and Michael Warren (Louven: Peeters, 2001) 145-173.

[3] Scott, 153.

professionals affiliated with the church who also were accused of sexual abuse.[4] In all, these numbers speak to the significant impact of this crisis and the likelihood that in teaching and learning contexts many may have been affected by the sex abuse crisis, either by knowing personally or knowing of a survivor. Unrelated to the crisis in the church, some will have experienced some type of trauma in their own lives and conversation about the sex abuse crisis may serve as a trigger unleashing harsh memories. It is critically important that they be given the space to express themselves.

L. Callid Keefe-Perry and Zachary Moon (2019) argue persuasively that the study of trauma in the area of religious education be "more than a niche area of interest," calling for an understanding of trauma as "a regular part of the reflective lenses of all religious educations' scholars and practitioners.[5]" Citing the work of Bruce Perry, they suggest that the numbers of people in any given classroom whose lives have been disrupted by some form of trauma could be 1/3 of those gathered.[6] Such numbers certainly support the necessity of safe spaces and the embrace of therapeutic language in religious education concerning abuse. But Keefe-Perry and Moon challenge the notion of safe spaces, calling for learning contexts in which both survivors and teachers foster, not just safe spaces, but communities of courageous risk-taking. Identifying learning spaces only as "safe spaces," they maintain, places the onus primarily on the facilitator to create such spaces.[7] The fostering of courageous risk-taking may take a commitment of all learning participants.

Attending to risk-taking, especially for those who have suffered trauma, may involve expanding languages of learning and teaching to aesthetic forms of writing and expression. Frank Rogers (2008), a narrative arts therapist, speaks of his drama program with teenage boys who have suffered abuse and live in a residential treatment program.[8] He describes how their imaginative agency in creating plays that portray the experience of God's total indifference in their lives can help his students name and discover truths about their lives. In addition, Keefe-Perry and Moon, heeding the work of Rebecca Chopp, caution against an "over-emphasis on rationalism" which "inherently suppresses the expression of experiences wherein one's very sense of self is violated, ruptured, or damaged.[9]" Acting calls for embodied knowledge; poetry invites symbolic expression. Both of these imaginative forms may foster deeper and more authentic communication especially for those who struggle to articulate in discursive ways the impacts of their trauma.

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[4] Karen J. Terry, Cynthia Calkins Mercado, and Anthony D. Perillo "Priests Who Abuse and Were Abused: Understanding Victimization in the Catholic Church," *Victims and Offenders* (3, 2008) 412-422.

[5] L. Callid Keefe-Perry and Zachary Moon, "Courage in Chaos: the Importance of Trauma-Informed Adult Religious Education," *Religious Education*. (V. 114, 1, 2019) 30,31.

[6] Ibid, 32.

[7] Ibid, 33.

[8] Frank Rogers, Jr, "There is the Hope: Abused Boys Finding God Through Fiction," *Religious Education*, (V. 103, 3, 2008) 293-296.

[9] Keefe-Perry and Moon, 36.

Another key language in promoting dialogue and healing in communities of faith and learning is that of the homily. Homilies can provoke new insight and engender a renewed sense of solidarity with persons and pericopes in Scripture. Their tones can reflect both the challenge and the affirmation of the prophets; the stories and the examples the homilist offers may indeed meet the listeners just as they are in their panoply of emotions. Homilies, though, can easily fail. Shelly Rambo's (2010) work on trauma and theology points to a frequent articulation of the paschal mystery of Christ as a linear narrative of new life swallowing up the pain of death.[10] Those who have suffered the trauma of sex abuse, either directly or indirectly, often cannot experience that new life. Their trauma does not allow them to shake off their pain, as it were; instead they often find themselves simply remaining, trying to make it through each day, carrying with them their deeply internalized scars. Rambo proposes a "theology of remaining," that correlates better with the experience of those who have suffered trauma. How might the homilies in communities of faith and learning embrace such a theology? Good homilies reflect nuanced theology that demonstrate empathic understanding of the impacts of the trauma of sex abuse.

Gleaning Insights from Neuroscience

In addition to a diversity of languages employed in addressing the sex abuse crisis, the positive impacts of neuroscience research on the field of religious education cannot be underestimated and relate directly to fostering learning and healing for communities addressing the sex abuse crisis. David Hogue's (2003) work on imagination and storytelling is especially instructive in this context.[11] Hogue describes imagination as "the distinctively human capacity to envision multiple alternative realities.[12]" Imagination can usher in a world of possibility: possible vocational interests and career opportunities, possible gifts and talents to develop, possible relationships to pursue, possible goals to set. The scenarios are endless and the possibilities of promoting healing through fostering imagination and storytelling are promising.

The workings of the imagination are creative by nature. Integrally linked with perception and memory, the creative nature of imagination is related to how humans record information in the first place. Neuroscientists tell us that the very act of brain perception is interpretive and creative by nature.[13] Rather than passively recording data, the brain works to create images and connect them to sensory data. Perception and imagination work hand in hand as a creative dynamic. The images in the brain, Hogue maintains, are "more like art than snapshots." Thus, the processes of perception and imagination, are not so much mechanical ones, functioning like a machine, but artistic ones. Hogue offers the example of the visual artist engaged in the creative work of drawing a

[10] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

[11] David A. Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2003)

[12] Ibid, 44.

[13] Ibid, 25.

portrait.[14] Such an artist does not simply reconstruct a person's face on a piece of canvas through precise measurements and calculations. As Hogue contends, an artist's rendering of a portrait is an interpretive exercise which captures the soul of the individual being portrayed, not only his or her facial proportions in correct alignment with each other. The final rendering of the portrait is a result of the interplay of perception, memory, and imagination all of which are integrally linked for the artist. Telling stories is similar to creating portraits. They allow participants to craft stories that, while attending to memory, also invite new possibilities and can nurture hope and healing.

Not many of us are portrait artists nor are we necessarily trained in the healing work of art or narrative therapy. While religious education is not meant to be therapy, how might we cultivate imagination in liberating, healing ways, given the crippling reality of sexual abuse that many students face? David Hogue (2011) has disabused us of the notion that memories are locked files that are neatly stored in distinct categories that make up the brain.[15] The brain encodes or records information by filtering images and sounds throughout the brain. Every time we re-collect those images, we can do so in different ways. As Hogue contends, our feelings and experiences at the time our re-collecting those memories help to shape the ways in which we re-collect. In other words, the circumstances that promote imaginative story-telling can shape the very content of the stories. As practitioners and academics, then, we are challenged to foster productive settings that can indeed shape the story-telling in positive ways.

In discussing imagination and storytelling, several religious educators and pastoral theologians raise salient suggestions that can offer some helpful parameters for our consideration. I would like to draw upon the insights of Claire Annelise Smith (2011) and Mary Clark Moschella (2008) to provide insights about imagination and story-telling in the context of communities that have been traumatized by sexual abuse.

Utilizing the findings of neuroscience on the development of the pre-frontal cortex and the limbic system, Smith emphasizes the critical role that reflection time can play in allowing space for the imagination to expand. Commenting on adolescent brain development, she notes how the limbic system, driving emotional responses and reactions, evolves at a markedly more rapid pace than the pre-frontal cortex, the executive functioning component controlling critical thinking, deliberation, and planning.[16] Smith suggests that especially in the current technological age, one that has gifted us with the strengths and limitations of manifold social networking sites and a vast array of mind-numbing video games, a habitus of passivity and disengagement with others could hamper the growth of reasoning and reflective capacities. Citing the work of Patricia Greenfield, Smith notes that "critical thinking and imagination are somewhat stymied by constant stimuli.[17]" To develop imagination and critical thinking as a complement to emotional

[14] Ibid, 20.

[15] David Hogue, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Brain," *Religious Education* (V 106, 3, 211) 260.

[16] Claire Anneliese Smith, "Still Developing: Teenagers, Brains, and the Arts," *Religious Education* (V 106, 2, 2011) 262

[17] Ibid, 263.

development, young people need opportunities to reflect in safe, challenging and liberating ways that are not easily found through technology. Even more, young people who have suffered trauma such as sexual abuse especially need healthy and reflective spaces because they may be particularly vulnerable to intense emotional reactions in their relationships and overall interactions. Such spaces could help provide time to process, to share, and to foster relationships rooted in trust. Out of such positive interactions, participants can imagine "future stories," in which people can envision their future in healthy, productive, and hopeful ways.

To develop productive spaces for reflection and imagination, academicians and practitioners can benefit from Mary Clark Moschella's (2008) scholarship as a pastoral theologian. Moschella speaks of "ethnographic listening," a type of deep listening that forces one to renounce any pretense of expertise.[18] This intense level of listening involves suspending judgment and allowing oneself to become a learner again. In academic settings it may be especially difficult to surrender one's role as expert. Moshella describes this approach to listening as floating. "As you stop being an expert," Moschella says, "you start really being there; suspended, you listen, watch, perceive, take in the context of the interaction, and perhaps begin to sense the currents of group life.[19]" According to Moschella, people know instinctively when they are heard and may readily admit that the quality of listening provoked the depth of sharing, as painful as it may have been. Moschella further relays that it would not be uncommon for someone to comment "you heard me into sharing.[20]"

Strategic Partnerships

Fostering listening and healthy spaces of interaction is especially aided through partnership with mental health professionals. In order to be attentive fully to the needs of learning communities addressing the sex abuse crisis, homilists, teachers, and pastoral ministers should not work in a vacuum. They need to consult and collaborate with mental health professionals. Most higher education contexts have counseling centers with professional therapists and psychologists. Local houses of worship may have access to community mental health centers that can possibly be a resource. Partnership with professional counselors is vital to the success of efforts to educate about the sex abuse crisis in the church and to attend to the needs of participants. It is important that those who have suffered the trauma of sex abuse be informed ahead of time about what will be discussed. Participants deserve the permission to opt out of discussions that may elicit in them pain, panic and severe anxiety. Presenters need to be trained and prepared to refer students to counseling centers if the need arises. The presence of counselors at seminars also helps to convey the solicitous concern of the community and communicates clearly that the organizers take very seriously the needs of the learners.

Partnerships among the various academic disciplines also can foster more robust and holistic discussion of the impacts of the sex abuse crisis. By its nature the sex abuse crisis

[18] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008) 142.

[19] Ibid, 143.

[20] Ibid, 142.

connects inherently to disciplines such as psychology, law, criminal justice, history, philosophy, and theology. But the fields of business, marketing, management and mass communication also provide critical lens by which one can examine the crisis. It is important to be multi-dimensional in one's approach to this extensive and systemic topic.

Pedagogy of Dangerous Memory

Finally, it is very important that the communities of learning, in all their efforts to be pastorally sensitive to the needs of those who have suffered trauma, never forget that sex abuse is a justice issue, not to be dismissed because of the intensity of pain it evokes. Religious educators must counter the attempts of communities of faith to silence discussion about the sex abuse crisis in the church. Some might suggest that since the establishment of the USCCB's Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (2002) that the problem has largely been addressed. While advances have certainly been made, such an attitude can easily lead to passivity. Michael Warren (1989) warns about the tendency of churches and schools to "domesticate" young people rather than to "politicize" them.[21] The power dynamic must not be forgotten. At Boston College's conference on the sex abuse crisis more than a dozen years ago, Paul Lakeland (2006) posited that institutionalized secrecy is critical to the systemic problem of the scandal.[22] At the same conference, Jean Bartunek (2006) emphasized the "organizational silence" so common to hierarchical structures which rely on underlings to keep its secrets.[23] The barring of the organization, Voices of the Faithful, from Catholic diocesan facilities is a prime example of this silencing. Likewise, the hesitation of Catholic institutions of higher education to address directly the sex abuse crisis also reflects this notion of organizational silence.

Employing the language of theologian, Jean Baptist Metz, Russell Butkus (1989) calls religious educators to a pedagogy of "dangerous memory" as a process of critical reflection on suffering.[24] At the time Butkus was lamenting the amnesia common to contemporary, middle class U. S. Catholics who forgot their heritage as poor immigrants or asylum seekers. Thirty years later, Butkus' argument sadly still applies to the issue of immigration. At the same time this pedagogy of dangerous memory might well be directed to education about the sex abuse crisis in communities of faith and learning. For Butkus, the second and third movements of Thomas Groome's (1991) shared praxis model are employed. In this second movement one might reflect critically on the current and past influences that shape an individual's assumptive world as it relates to the topic of the sex abuse crisis. In the third movement one turns to the Story/Vision of the tradition and particularly the subversive remembrances of narratives of those

[21] Michael Warren, *Youth, Gospel, Liberation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 34.

[22] Paul Lakeland, "Understanding the Crisis in the Church," in *Church Ethics and Its Organizational Context*, ed. Jean Bartunek, Mary Ann Hinsdale, and James F. Keenan (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, Roman & Littlefield, 2006) 7.

[23] Jean Bartunek, "The Sex Abuse Crisis as Social Drama," in *Church Ethics and Its Organizational Context,* 19.

[24] Russell Butkus, "Dangerous Memories: Toward a Pedagogy of Social Transformation," in *Religious Education as Social Transformation*, ed. Allen J. Moore (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press) 220-227

who seek justice. In this component participants can learn of the exemplary witness of justice seekers and peacemakers whose risk-taking can inform educators of the strategies and stamina needed to take on this subject. The final component of the third movement involves some type of personal interaction with a survivor who has suffered injustice. A thoughtful integration of these three movements, following from Butkus' argument, has the capacity to instill in learners a sustained commitment to undo the injustice and effect positive action. Butkus' notion of a pedagogy of dangerous memory deserves serious attention especially in the face of the insidious tendency for institutions to gloss over the harmful effects of the sex abuse crisis. Such a pedagogy may ensure that the sex abuse crisis does not become part of a null curriculum that falls to the wayside as a victim of amnesia.

Conclusion

These insights begin and end in the same place: with my reflections as a practitioner of religious education, as the director of a mission and ministry center at a Catholic college, seeking to attend effectively and with integrity to the sex abuse crisis in the church. The March 2019 symposium at my own institution sparked a dialogue that needs to be sustained here and at many institutions of learning in American Catholic Higher education. James O'Toole (2006) has described the history of the Catholic church in America in six stages: the priest-less church; the church in the democratic republic; the immigrant church; the church of Catholic action; the church of Vatican II; and the church in the 21st century.[25] In some ways, the phrase, "what goes around, comes around," is apt especially in noting the dwindling number of priests in the current stage, resembling O'Toole's first stage. What remains unresolved is O'Toole's final quandary: that in this age lay people may finally be taking their leadership to a new level. As he said, "Perhaps, in combination with the gradual disappearance of the clergy, laypeople will again become the principal sustainers of their own religious identity, thereby leading the American Catholic church back to the future.[26]" Such leadership will not occur in healthy and exemplary ways if the sex abuse crisis is put under the carpet. Its impacts need to be addressed thoroughly and systematically. Neuroscience, trauma-informed practices, diverse teaching languages and pedagogies help provide the tools necessary to sustain the conversation about the sex abuse crisis. Educators need to rise to the challenge with courage and confidence.

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[25] James O'Toole, "The Six Ages of Catholicism in America," in *Church Ethics and Its Organizational Context*, ed. Jean Bartunek, Mary Ann Hinsdale, and James F. Keenan (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, Roman & Littlefield, 2006) 31-41.

[26] Ibid, 40.

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