

Impact Statement of Michael Bland

By Michael Bland

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From my perspective, I would like to tell you about the effects of being sexually abused by a priest. Some might want to hear all the details, but for me, that would not be emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually beneficial. However, since numbers appear to be important allow me to say this. An adult, who happened to be a priest, sexually abused me on more than one occasion and to my knowledge at least one other victim came forward.

Perhaps my priest perpetrator suffered from adolescent arrestment, narcissism, arrogance, sexual identity issues, depression or simply an ongoing lapse of judgment. The reality remains; he was an adult, a priest, and I was a minor. He sexually abused me. To the perpetrating priest's credit at least he admitted to sexually abusing me.

I remember being close to a number of priests through elementary school. With my family, I remember being active in our parish, perhaps, more than most. I remember putting my hand up when a teacher would ask "who wants to be a priest?"

I can still clearly remember this particular priest's first homily. His main focus was on how he wanted to work with the youth. I remember feeling hopeful since I was fifteen and wanted to be involved. In the weeks to come I got to know this priest. I remember feeling special with this particular priest. I remember the good times and the good things we did together. He treated me, I don't know maybe different, maybe just special.

I remember him doing things to me that had never been done to me before. I did not know what to call it. He told me it was ok, it was part of growing up, it was normal. This left me confused questioning in my own mind how could this be? How could we do this? Does he think about it when he is saying mass? I wondered if he told anyone. I was confused. I was afraid. At the time, I told no one, but then again, I did not know how to talk about it or what to say. I became less active in the church, but then again I got a job, so that was the excuse. I went to mass, but stood in the back. I would not go to communion to him because it did not feel right.

Then came the time for me to decide if I wanted to go to the seminary. I questioned if I was good enough? What if they found out? Would I get hollered at? What would people think if they knew? If they found out would I be asked to leave? I remember being afraid of taking those psychological tests for fear that they would find out. At the last possible moment I decided I would try it for one year. I did not want to give up my vocation.

It was hard to sit in silence because I feared my inner questions and doubts. I guess I became numb to my emotions. I learned how to hide them. I had an inner goal. I was going to be a better priest than him. It was not easy, but it was what I wanted--what I felt I was called to be.

Through spiritual direction and therapy I began to understand my fear and my desire to be a better priest than him. It took time for me to inwardly admit that I was sexually abused. It took even longer to trust anyone with it. I started to get a glimpse of that feeling of peace and healing. But then it I; would fade and I felt this cold dark place within myself. Then I realized the only way I could move beyond the darkness was to break the silence. That meant I had to come forward and tell my story. Then I really felt that fear. It took time to get the strength, courage, and peace. It took time to find the words to give my secret a voice.

After sending a letter to the perpetrator's superior, I was asked to come to Rome to meet with his superiors. I was told not to tell anyone of my "weekend trip" not family, friends, or the priests I lived with. I obeyed their request. After this meeting in Rome, I felt alone and isolated. It was then that I remember going to St Peter's and to a small chapel. It was there that I sat alone for hours, I cried, I embraced my fear--what the perpetrating priest and I held secret was now known and out of our control. I felt different, there was a sense of purification while I let go of my fear, I knew in my heart that my life would never be the same, but I also believed I would be ok. I am not sure, but I think I felt the presence of God in a way I never did before or since. One day I want to return to St. Peter's.

Shortly after returning I was requested to meet with their attorney and answer some questions. I was also asked to partake in a reconciliation process with my perpetrator since we were both priests. I could not meet either of their requests. With the help of my therapist, I began thinking about myself and put my psychological, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing first.

In my opinion, this is when the half-truths began and sides were taken. My priest perpetrator moved out of his residence because he could not sleep at night due to the noise of the traffic. My priest perpetrator resigned from his ministry position because he was burnt out. My priest perpetrator went to a treatment program because he was dealing with personal issues and depression. I felt re-victimized again, again, and again. I felt they did not believe me, that my story was not seen as credible, that he was more important than me. It felt to me as if I was no longer one of the good guys, but one of the victims to be dealt with.

In a card dated November 29th the perpetrator's superior wrote to my parents: "forgive me, if you can, for not getting in touch with sooner. This brief note is not to give excuses for my behavior, but rather to tell you I have been praying for you and Michael from the beginning. Michael told me on the Feast of St. Ann, July 13th." What is sad and re-victimizing is the fact that this first contact took over four months. Also, I did not tell him on July 13th, I told him on July 26th a day,. an anniversary, I will always remember. The sadness and hurt was in the sexual abuse, the anger is in his failure to respond humanely, justly, or pastorally. This is what causes the dark shadow of suspicion over the entire church.

Meetings with my sister and parents did not go well. My family felt "the church" was being critical of me and defensive or protective of the other priest. My sister was told of the importance for me to follow the gospel and forgive my brother priest. My parents were told there are two sides to every story. Promises were made and never followed through. Their unwillingness and inability to listen or hear the pain of my parents left them broken hearted, angry, and alienated. They were left with faith and religion, but not a church.

My parents were victimized by this behavior as well as by what happened to me, one of their children. I can still see their pain and feel their brokenness. My sister, brothers, parents and I were all victimized. If our trust in the church is to be restored it will not only take action but also a transformation of attitudes. Yes, a transformation of attitudes and action not only words, policies or structures.

The religious community to which I belonged began to question me. Asking why I said anything, questioning my intent, reminding me of my faults, suggesting treatment for me, and telling me that I was a "loose cannon". They evaluated me and questioned my ministry. I felt isolated within the community, while only a few people would talk with me, many more were ready, willing, and able to talk about me and judge me. I felt they feared me. I was pathologised.

After two years I felt that a separation from the religious community became not an option but a necessity for my own spiritual good, moral integrity, and psychological wellbeing. I chose to no longer be re-victimized and left religious life. For me, my fear and feelings of paralyses no longer have power over me.

After my last parish mass I revered the altar, placed my stole and chasuble upon the altar and followed the procession out for the last time. The priesthood lost me, but kept the perpetrator. Perhaps he is not saying public mass or allowed to be alone with minors, but he has the privilege of choosing to wear the collar, being called father, or baptize, marry, and bury his family. The church has taken care of him.

After leaving religious life I went on to earn a doctorate in clinical psychology in addition to my doctorate in ministry in pastoral psychology. I currently work in a group psychological practice and continue to work part-time for the Archdiocese of Chicago's Victim Assistance Ministry as I have for the past 10 years. I also consult with other dioceses and religious communities. While perhaps this suggests my life went on, and it did, it is not to imply it has ever been the same. All my fears came true. My life was changed in ways I could never have imagined. I continue to be victimized because the perpetrating priest has something that was stolen from me--my youthful innocence and my priesthood. At times, I am still plagued with questions starting with "what if..." --Questions that can never be answered.

Since the priest who abused me went to treatment and was "cured" he has taught at a seminary. He is now a full Professor and Vice Dean at a Pontifical University. He is scheduled to teach this summer at a nationally known Catholic University. The President of that University has assured me that he is not teaching there, while the university's registrar and web-site both indicate that he will be teaching there. Whom am I to believe? What am I to I believe? Yet, I am told that "I am not to offer any opinion regarding my perpetrator, his retention, supervision, or his dealings to any other person."

In general, I believe treatment is a lifelong process for perpetrators. In general, I believe all perpetrators should seek to blend into the community and not be a community or religious leader. As a victim and thriving survivor I believe there should be a zero tolerance for the immoral, sinful and criminal act of sexually abusing a minor. Zero tolerance past, present, and future.

As many of you have invited victims to come forward to tell their story, may I also suggest you request unnamed perpetrating priests to come forward and admit to their past or present criminal activity and not put all the responsibility on the victim. I am thankful for this opportunity to share my story. My hope and trust is that you can be as clear and decisive on this issue as you have been on issues relating to the laity and morality.

PEACE BE WITH YOU