

Richard Sipe: the interview [18th of January 2011]

Richard Sipe is a world renowned expert on child abuse by catholic clergy. Here he answers 21 questions posed to him by AHA Lëtzebuerg (Luxembourg's Alliance of Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics).



AHA: Your personal career progression has been out of the ordinary: from Benedictine monk to a well-known expert on child abuse by catholic clergy: can you please tell us a bit about yourself?

Richard Sipe: I am 78 years old. I entered a Benedictine monastic school in 1946 when I was 13 and progressed through profession as a monk, college degree and theological seminary (in Rome and Minnesota) until priestly ordination in 1959. After a 5-year stint as a high school teacher/counsellor and parish priest I was asked to train specifically to deal with the mental health concerns of Roman Catholic priests and Religious. The next 6 years of training (Menninger Foundation, Kansas and Seton Psychiatric Institute, Maryland) focused on psychological dimensions of human development and mental illnesses. Seton hospital was a centre that had been a primary resource for the consultation and treatment of mentally troubled Catholic clergy since 1923. The psychiatric and psychology staff had vast experience with the psychic and sexual development and deviations of Catholic clergy.

In 1960 I began collecting data on the celibate/sexual behaviours and practices of priests; that eventually developed into an ethnological study that concluded in 1985. The results were published in 1990. It defines religious celibacy and records the range of celibate violations of priests.

In 1970 I petitioned for and received a dispensation from my vows, married and developed a private practice of psychotherapy, lectured in major Catholic seminaries (one Pontifical), Catholic colleges and medical schools.

AHA: Is sexual abuse of minors a new or a rather old problem within the Catholic Church?

Richard Sipe: The sexual involvement of adults with children—especially incest—is ancient. Historical accounts since the beginning of the church have recorded sexual abuse of minors by clergy. Most prominent are the writings of St. Peter Damian (1007-72) on celibacy; his 1049 letter to Pope Leo IX is an explicit exposition of priest abuse of minors, specifically boys. A priest's sexual violation of a minor girl or boy is a two-fold violation; a betrayal of his celibate promise and destructive use of the power of his office. Peter Damian compared it to "spiritual incest." With two colleagues (Doyle & Wall) in 2006 I published a summary of the history of clergy abuse under the title of *Sex, Priests and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church's 2000 Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse*.

AHA: Could you summarise your scientific studies on sexual abuse of children and adolescents? What is the general situation, what percentage of clergy get involved in such practices?

Richard Sipe: On the completion of my ethnological study of celibacy in 1985 I concluded that at any one time no more than half of Catholic clergy professing celibacy were actually practicing sexual abstinence. [A figure not disputed in 1993 by Cardinal Jose Sanchez Secretary for the Congregation of the Clergy in Rome.] In addition, data showed that 6 percent of priests get sexually involved with minors. In 2004 a statistical study commissioned by the American bishops and utilizing documents from their files concluded that 6 ½ percent of priests during that period were reported for abusing minors. Currently 6,500 American clergy have been reported for abuse. The most reliable estimates of abusing Catholic clergy in the U.S. now run between 6 and 9 percent, with many dioceses recording 10 percent. The Los Angeles archdiocese had 11 ½ percent abusing priests in the active ranks of its clergy.

AHA: What are the main reasons for this high percentage of catholic clergy that sexually abuse minors?

Richard Sipe: It can be stated with reasonable certitude that a higher proportion of Roman Catholic priests abuse minors than a group of men of comparable age, training and profession (income). Many reasons can account for this particular deviance among a group of men who are publicly sponsored as sexually safe—clerical culture is a haven for underdeveloped and psychosexually maldeveloped men: a) the clerical culture demands perfect lifelong sexual abstinence and obedience from any man ordained to the priesthood; b) celibacy is maintained as a means of institutional control; c) priesthood excludes women and thus establishes a homosocial society; d) effective training for celibacy is deficient or entirely lacking in seminaries and religious houses; e) celibacy is not well practiced within the system by superiors—bishops, rectors, confessors, etc.—this establishes a dissonance between stated doctrine and actual practice that in turn encourages the development of a sociopathic atmosphere; f) clerical culture attracts, cultivates, promotes and protects psychosexually immature men.

AHA: Would you say there is a direct link between the catholic faith itself and these crimes?

Richard Sipe: There are some direct links between the Catholic teaching and the crimes of abuse: First the scientifically unfounded and distorted teachings about human sexual development and nature the Vatican holds cannot be sustained by reason. A large proportion of priests and a great number of lay Catholics cannot assent to its moral conclusion. The assertion that all sexual activity outside of a legitimate marriage is mortally sinful is as unreasonable as it is to assert that the sun revolves around the earth. The idea that the Catholic Church knows and defines the intrinsic nature of sex is not correct. Years ago a theologian at St. Louis University identified the "tangle of issues that clog the agenda of the Catholic Church and keep it from productive leadership and credible action. They all have to do with sex: abortion, contraception, masturbation, sex before marriage or after divorce, homosexuality, artificial insemination, the requirement of celibacy for ordination, the ordination of women to the priesthood, and a married priesthood." All of these issues should be open for debate and discussion. Refusal to dialogue about the reality of human sexuality leaves Catholic priests in the untenable position of having to teach what they cannot live, believe or defend. That system of teaching leaves clergy immature and vulnerable. On a very practical level some of the vulnerable, immature clerics are more prone to resort to unreasonable sources for their sexual gratification. Also the dependence on the secrecy of the sacrament of penance to hide violations and assure easy forgiveness facilitates repetition and recidivism of sex crimes rather than reform of behavior.

AHA: Would you argue that the number of cases unveiled represent the true number, or rather the tip of the iceberg?

Richard Sipe: The exact numbers of abused or clergy abusers are not known. Our experience in the United States has been that sexual abuse by clergy is symptom of extreme systemic dysfunction. It is very difficult for victims to come forward in public to accuse their priest abuser. The power structure of the church is extremely resistive to any exposure of its crimes. Most victims of clergy abuse take an average of 32 years before they can report the crime they suffered. We know only a portion of actual cases of abuse and assault by Catholic clergy. In Europe only the tip of the iceberg is now showing. It has taken us in the U.S. nearly three decades to acquire the base line of cases we have established (6-9%). Abuse and sexual activity among the higher echelons of the church have not yet been exposed. The sexual activity (past or present) of bishops and superiors is one of the most powerful elements that condition them to cover up the crimes of their subordinates. They need not have abused children themselves, but their sexual activity is likely to be exposed if the web of secrecy ruptures.

AHA: How far would you see celibacy as a reason for these crimes?

Richard Sipe: There is no question that mandated celibacy is one important element in the phenomena of Catholic clergy abusing minors. It forms a synergism within a homosocial culture that fosters and rewards psychosexual immaturity or regression.

Emotional and social dependence, overvalued conformity, a sense of entitlement, assurance of superiority, the arrogance of absolute certitude, and immunity from criticism or personal responsibility for mistakes, are all constitutive elements of the Catholic clerical culture.

AHA: May I ask a personal question: you were a monk for many years yourself: was it easy for you to live celibacy? Is a celibate life possible? Is celibacy at all natural?

Richard Sipe: Celibacy (religious) can be possible and is practiced by 2% to 10% of vowed clergy over long periods. I, like many others, found it possible and rewarding for an extended period of time. The structure of a regulated life, community support, satisfying work, and a routine of prayer and contemplation - some elements that continue in my professional and married life - made celibacy relatively easy for me. It fit me at the time, and I learned a great deal from the practice. For me obedience was a far greater problem. The 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was not acceptable, intellectually or pastorally.

Some very devoted, committed scholars, and dedicated men and women employ the practice of celibacy in the service of others. Gandhi remains an explicit example. Celibacy, however, is not natural. Church teaching recognizes that and calls it a gift and a grace. I know many active priests who say that celibacy is "impossible." Huxley has called it the "greatest sexual perversion."

My position is clear: celibacy, in all of its aspects, must be freely chosen and openly discussed.

AHA: In your view, why does the Catholic Church keep imposing celibacy for their clergy, despite all the problems and despite all the criticism?

Richard Sipe: There is a long and solid tradition of celibacy in Christian spirituality—as there is in other religions. The only biblical endorsement we have is that of St. Paul who posed it as a personal choice and not a divine dictate. The spiritual motivation for celibacy does persist in tradition; however, the mandated requirement of celibacy for clergy is founded on (administrative and corporate) control. Mandated celibacy for clergy has never worked well. The monarchical structure of the church will collapse to one degree or another if the demand for celibacy is abrogated. The church (including the Vatican) has an almost inexhaustible tolerance for celibate violation in order to preserve that power. Priests leaving the priesthood and public scandal are prices the church is willing to pay for perpetuating the demand. It is a complicated social problem. Clerical celibacy is le don, the basic social contract between the Catholic Church and her members. The belief in sexual purity has given the priesthood its particular power.

AHA: One often tends to mention only the sexual abuse cases, forgetting the apparent cover-up. Nowadays it seems as if many cases of sexual abuse could have been averted had action been taken at the first signs. How do you see this?

Richard Sipe: There is no question that the corruption in the Catholic Church, of which abuse of minors is a major manifestation, goes to the very top of ecclesiastical structure.

This is fostered in three specific ways: the sexual behaviours of all varieties by the highest officials in the church and Vatican; the tolerance of these behaviours on every level of clerical institutions from seminaries to the Vatican; and the cover-up of even criminal activity under the guise of privilege and spiritual forgiveness. The church has inflicted a great deal of harm to countless people because of their (arrogant and wilful) modus operandi and their inability to intervene in any effective way. Documents demonstrate and will continue to substantiate the claims that the systemic operation of the church on every level has conspired to avoid scandal, protect its financial interests, and its bella figura over the protection of children and the vulnerable. Europe is experiencing the unfolding of the pattern and practice of the Catholic sexual system just as we did in the United States from 1985 till now.

AHA: Does the Catholic Church have a tradition of covering up their aberrations, in particular sexual abuse cases? If yes, why?

Richard Sipe: Historical documents, archives and studies reveal a long tradition of secrecy and even prevarication about the sexual violations of clergy. The preservation of the image of a pure and perfect priesthood has been vital to the interests of the clerical power structure. Scandal undermines control and credibility. Avoiding scandal, that is, allegations, facts or impressions that could damage the reputation of the church or give enemies of the church occasion to attack has been a priority of the Vatican especially since the Protestant Reformation.

AHA: Do you have tangible evidence or information on whether current pope Ratzinger was involved in the sex abuse scandal, either directly or through covering up?

Richard Sipe: I have read accounts in the press that Pope Benedict XVI as Archbishop of Munich overlooked and failed to monitor and discipline a priest who had been credibly accused of child abuse. In essence he covered up the crime. While he was Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Office of the Inquisition) he refused to discipline an American priest who credibly abused 200 deaf children ("for the greater good of the church"). These incidents and documents have been well circulated in the world press. Any of us in the United States who have worked with civil or criminal cases of abuse by priests have seen Ratzinger's signature on documents that show he knew the facts of the alleged abuse by priests. There is no one in the Vatican who has had more information about sex abuse of clergy than Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI).

AHA: Pope Ratzinger recently produced some sort of an apology for the abuse of children by catholic clergy. Do you consider this apology to be sincere?

Richard Sipe: The Pope has made a number of apologies about clergy abuse, some in public from St. Peter's pulpit others in private sites in the presence of a few victims. His comments have become more personal and emotion-laden over the past few years especially since publicity about crimes in Ireland, Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium have surfaced. I have no reason to doubt his sincerity. But these belated gestures lack the

substance of real understanding of the systemic nature of the problem or any indication of reform.

AHA: In Luxembourg, the Catholic Church recently put in place a hotline for abuse victims by their own clergy. What's the credibility of such initiatives?

Richard Sipe: Establishing a Hotline to report abuse is a common practice as groups initially become aware of the public dimensions of the problem. I have participated in hotlines in the U.S. and England (sponsored by victims). They can be effective in breaking ground and helping frightened victims to come forward. The key must be to exposing, not hiding, the existence and gravity of the problem. Reports of hotlines in Germany, Austria, Belgium and The Netherlands have recently drawn attention to the scope of the problem in their areas.

AHA: When hoping for a complete unveiling of sex abuse cases, what's your opinion on the strong links between state and church in countries like Luxembourg?

Richard Sipe: I regret that I have never visited Luxembourg and do not know the relationships between church and state. I have the opinion that the church should not be above legitimate civil law and clergy should be subject to criminal prosecution equal to any citizen.

AHA: We have now seen that a certain percentage of catholic clergymen sexually abuse children during their careers. Do the other clergymen, thus the majority, practice perfect celibacy, as it is often claimed by the Catholic church? Can you tell us a bit on the results of your studies on sexual practices by catholic clergy?

Richard Sipe: I have already alluded to some of the conclusions from my 25-year ethnological study of celibacy and sex among Roman Catholic priests in the U.S. Since sexual urges come and go and vary in intensity and with opportunity sexual abstinence can be relatively periodic. Most priests (90%) abstain from sex periodically. At any one time 50% are sexually active in a variety of behaviours. Masturbation is the most common and most frequent sexual activity across the board among priests and bishops. But involvement with women is prevalent either experimentally or in sequential affairs, or with one companion. Clergy sex with a male companion, similarly experimental and episodic or promiscuously or with one steady partner have all been recorded in the behaviours of 30% of American priests. Many clergy try to satisfy sexual curiosity via pornography; the Internet sex is new and fertile source of preoccupation for some priests. Other deviant behaviours are recorded among clergy.

AHA: So you are saying that around a third of catholic clergy are practicing homosexual activities, which seems in stark contrast to the official position of the catholic church on homosexuality, i.e. its disapprobation. What's your opinion on this subject?

Richard Sipe: Repeated studies indicate that 30% of Catholic priests have a homosexual orientation. Informed sources declare that this is true also of bishops in the United States.

Several knowledgeable and well respected priests claim that 50% of men in seminaries and novitiates today qualify for this categorization. Because gay orientation is common across the board the priesthood is popularly considered a gay profession. This is ironic. The Catholic church's teaching about homosexuality is a paradox. Many saints, popes and bishops can be counted among the homosexual population. A 1961 Vatican document said that gay men should not be accepted as seminary candidates. Recently Rome made more direct and all-encompassing stipulations on restricting gay men from ordination. The current Vatican position on gays was articulated in 1986 from cardinal Ratzinger's CDF Office: homosexual orientation is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. This teaching is indefensible as is the patent contradiction between theory and reality.

AHA: How do you see the position of the Catholic Church in relation to sex, in theory and in practice?

Richard Sipe: The church is at a "Copernican" moment in regard to human sexuality. Vatican understandings of human sexual nature, development, behaviour and identity are inadequate and not accurate. Dialogue and re-evaluation about sex must consider a shift equal to that of the heliocentric debate of the 17th Century. Measure instruments are less fixed, but equally complex issues are at stakes that are vital for the development of the life on the planet.

AHA: There has been a lot of talk on the sex abuse by catholic clergy, there were hotlines for the victims (like in Luxembourg and Austria), there were official investigations, there was the odd resignation or retirement, there was even some sort of apology by the pope: is the situation improving?

Richard Sipe: Awareness and publicity about the problem of sexual violation by priests and the pattern and practice of church officials to deny, minimize and cover up crimes is producing some reactions and attempts to cope with the reality of the crisis. Although good things are in process, we must not fool ourselves into thinking that the roots of the problem and necessary reforms have yet been even broached. Not one American bishop has raised his hand for effective reform after 25-years of exposure of the problem. All initiatives at combating the crisis have come from lay leaders and movements. The church has been reactive and defensive. I think that we are in an era of church reform equal to that of the Protestant Reformation. The battle lines are not denominational or geographic—they are between reason and fear; responsibility and control.

AHA: If, as you said at the beginning of this interview, the problem of sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy is known since the beginning of existence of the Catholic Church, do you see real chances that the church will actually be able to eventually quash the problem internally?

Richard Sipe: Yes, there is hope in the progress of thought and behaviour. The church is an institution in evolution. Religions must grow, adapt, evolve or die. The internal strife involved in the process has never been easy or without casualties and scars. Reason and grace are perennial guides. The Roman Catholic Church is an ecclesia semper reformanda

—it is in process. Human sexuality is the focus of the current challenge to Catholic reformation.

AHA: In your opinion, what would the Catholic Church have to change in their approach?

Richard Sipe: In my opinion the church must face every aspect of human sexuality openly and honestly—and dialogue, not proclaim. Truth is the answer. Any church that cannot tell the truth about itself has nothing to say.

AHA: Richard Sipe, thank you very much for the interview, and good luck with your work.