

July-August - Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church, by Leon J. Podles
BOOK REVIEW, by Paul Bower, New Oxford Review, CA

The Perennial Crisis of Clerical Sexual Abuse

Book Review:

Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church.

By Leon J. Podles.

Crossland Press. 675 pages. \$24.95.

Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church is a call to arms to the laity of the Catholic Church, an attack on clericalism, and a tocsin sounding to those parishioners who would blindly follow a corrupt and evil man merely because of his collar. Thoroughly researched and painstakingly detailed, Leon J. Podles's account of the history of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy inspires anger and disgust. The author focuses the brunt of his attention on abuse cases in the U.S., while including shorter treatments of international priestly sex scandals. The result is a greater insight into a very real, very devastating perennial crisis in the Church.

Podles spent twenty years in Washington, D.C., working at the Office of Federal Investigations. His job duties consisted mainly of fact-checking applications for security clearances. Spending countless hours poring over both fake and authentic documents and interviewing thousands of people gave Podles the ability to accurately identify con men. It also left Podles well equipped to begin the gargantuan undertaking of writing a history of sexual misconduct among the clergy. He started that work six years ago, and the culmination of that effort is this 675-page exploration of pure evil that includes nearly 90 pages of notes.

Podles begins with a brief overview of the Church's attitude toward the molestation of the young by priests and religious throughout the ages, with excerpts from the early Fathers of the Church, up to the 1950s, the decade in which the first well-documented cases of sexual abuse by the clergy in the U.S. were recorded in the Diocese of El Paso, Texas. The first two chapters of the book are hard to stomach, and the sexual brutality and diabolic nature of the acts described are rendered all the more shocking by the un-sensational way the author recounts them. Podles has no desire to offend the reader; it is clear that he believes that what actually happened in El Paso, and so many other dioceses, is itself enough to offend even the most hardened of cynics.

The purpose of Podles's in-depth examination of hundreds of sex-abuse cases in the Catholic Church is to expose a trend, a common element between seemingly isolated incidents. He hopes that in finding a common bond between the majority of offenders, it will become easier for seminaries to create adequate screening measures to keep the depraved from gaining access to the youth of the Church. Podles uncovers networks of child-abusers in the priesthood, some of which spanned entire geographic regions and crossed several diocesan borders. The most notable of these were in New Mexico and Iowa.

Podles constructs a composite of the ordained sex-abuser, which contains several key elements that constitute the personality of a man prone to abusing children. It was commonly assumed that abusive priests almost always suffered from a profound weakness around the young. This was, however, an erroneous assumption. Podles uncovers a predatory mentality inherent in most priests who've been accused of sexual misconduct with children. Podles's collected data points unilaterally to a desire for power and control, rather than sexual gratification, as the driving force behind the majority of priestly predators. Priests desire control over their victims because it makes them feel powerful, like a god. The root of this desire for power, according to Podles, is narcissism. He characterizes the abusing priest as a classic narcissist.

Podles argues that the office of the priesthood is especially attractive to narcissists, particularly since the late 1960s, when the reforms of Vatican II gave us a Mass more susceptible to becoming a showcase for charismatic or "flashy" priests who see themselves as stars in a liturgical melodrama. Being the center of attention for hundreds of people on at least a weekly basis can do terrible harm to one's sense of humility. The allure of this priestly "fame" attracts many men who can't be said to have a real vocation. While various

abuses of the Faith have existed since the inception of the Catholic Church, the Western world saw a great increase of sexual abuse perpetrated by the clergy starting roughly around the time of Vatican II. But Podles does not directly correlate the rise of sex scandals within the Church to the advent of the New Mass. He does, however, find the Novus Ordo much better suited to the personality-type of a sex criminal than the Tridentine Mass.

Podles also emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in a truly Christian life. But true love and compassion are never compatible with the toleration of mortal sin. You don't tell an abuser of intravenous drugs, for example, that you love him and care for him, and then turn around and give him clean needles. That's enablement, the opposite of compassion. Likewise, when a priest is an abuser of children, you don't make him chaplain of the local Boy Scouts. Yet this is exactly what happened when Fr. James Janssen of the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, became a nuisance to Bishop Gerald Francis O'Keefe. Janssen had confessed to O'Keefe's predecessor, Bishop Ralph Lee Hayes, that he had molested children. Hayes did his best to keep the matter quiet, and O'Keefe, taking the reins from Hayes, decided to make Janssen the chaplain of the Boy Scouts. This type of coddling of criminals is completely insane, but it wasn't the first or last time sexually abusive priests were reassigned to positions in close proximity to innocent children.

The question we've all asked is: Why would bishops hide the abuse of children? Podles answers that this was easier than actually trying to correct the problem of sexual abuse of children by priests. Men are made bishops, says Podles, because they are adept at towing the line. The vast majority of bishops are reluctant to handle abuse cases because it would prove to be a major headache — and a major financial drain on the diocese. This headache, it would appear, is more painful to most bishops than the vicious rape of their flock, and infinitely more so than the arduous task of laicizing a priest. In the modern era, with the intensely bureaucratic nature of the Vatican, laicizing a priest involves so much red tape that such a maneuver takes years to accomplish, and most bishops would rather naïvely pray that the problem take care of itself, or merely pawn the offending priest off to another diocese. Abuse, transfer to another diocese, and further abuse is a pattern Podles finds most revolting.

Podles is not saying anything new in *Sacrilege* by bringing to light the fact that men sin, and that the clerical state makes a sin committed that much more ghastly. Where Podles breaks new ground in this book is in his insistence that the problem of ongoing abuse of the young by a single priest would not be extant if it weren't for the complicity of the laity. Podles recounts hundreds of cases of abusing priests being aided and abetted by their congregations — e.g., of parents disregarding their children's claims of abuse, of families of the abused being threatened by their fellow parishioners, of priests seen as above reproach. This book brings to light an attitude found among much of the laity that an abused child would simply “bounce back” from grave sexual abuse once he grew up, that it really wasn't that big of a deal anyway. Surely not big enough to prevent Father from preaching his wonderful, self-esteem-boosting sermons.

Sacrilege ends on a hopeful note, with Podles giving credit to Pope Benedict XVI for putting into practice a process whereby the investigation of alleged abuse will become more transparent than in previous papacies. He also cites several dioceses that have made their records available to investigators of abuse cases.

Sacrilege is a well-reasoned, evenhanded effort to make sense of how the horrible pattern of priestly sexual abuse of children could continue virtually unchecked for so many decades. Podles instructs us that we owe it to our Creator to make sure that our shepherds do not lead the flock astray. It is our duty as laymen to love and assist our priests — but true love can never tolerate mortal sin. It especially cannot tolerate the corruption of innocent children.

Paul Bower writes from Ann Arbor, Michigan.