**Module N – Situational and Organizational Factors Affecting Sexual Abuse, Types of Offenders, Grooming Techniques, and Excuses, Justifications, and Desistance from Abuse**

**(Primarily for Dioceses)**

**Outline, Goals and Comments, Discussion Questions, References, and Sources**

**Outline**

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4. Settings Where Victims First Met Priests Who Abused Them (N-5 to N-9)
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**Goals and Comments**

The goals of Module N are multifaceted. The first is to gain an understanding of situational and organizational factors related to abuse. It is striking that nearly two-thirds of sexual abuse of minors took place in a church-related setting. The physical location of most abuse was on church property or in residences. The timing was usually during or after church services and parish events or at recreational and social events. Note that most of the abuse occurred in ordinary situations where priests find themselves every day as they go about their ministry. Organizational factors are similar in terms of focus, that is, over 40 percent of abuse was perpetrated by associate pastors and 25 percent by pastors in parish situations. Lower percentages were represented by priests in residence in a parish, in diocesan offices, schools, and chaplaincies. The fact of greatest importance here is that most sexual abuse of minors by clergy takes place in relationship with and in proximity to parish ministry.

The second goal of Module N is to identify and understand the major typologies of sexual abusers and personality characteristics of clergy offenders. The first two types, fixated offenders and regressed offenders, are differentiated by the degree to which deviant sexual behavior is entrenched and the basis of the psychological condition that led to abuse. **Fixated offenders** are characterized by compulsive attraction to children and often have not attained any degree of psychosexual maturity. Their actions are premeditated and do not stem from stressors. They typically recruit vulnerable children. Fixated offenders are most dangerous, of highest risk to the community, and have the highest rate of recidivism. **Regressed offenders** usually begin offending as adults and their offenses are triggered by stressors in the environment, including disordered childhood relationships. Stressors can be situational and are often related to loneliness, isolation, or anxiety. They prefer that their victims cooperate, but should they resist, regressed offenders do not usually follow through with sexually abusive behavior.

FBI typologies categorize offenders as **situational** or **preferential**. Offenders of the first type have poor coping skills and target victims who are accessible, either children or adults. They are often insecure misfits with low self-esteem. Preferential offenders court children and give them much attention and many enticements. Because of poor psychological development they are compulsively attracted to children and are aggressive and extremely dangerous.

The third goal of Module N relates to the phenomenon of grooming, which is pre-meditated behavior intended to manipulate a potential victim into complying with sexual abuse. Tactics may include seduction and testing of a child, emotional manipulation and verbal coercion. It may also involve catching the victim by surprise, using physical force, disguising sexual advances, and using alcohol and drugs. Building relationships to gain trust often precedes abuse and may take years to develop.

Finally, the fourth goal is to understand why abuse persists as offenders employ a variety of justifications and excuses, as well as deviance disavowal. Excuses include denial of responsibility and blaming the victim. Characteristics of accused priests are identified; justification for their actions, such as denying the wrongfulness and harmfulness of the behavior, and downplaying what actually occurred, are noted.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Taking into account the circumstances and timing that were most common when abuse was perpetrated, what instructions should be given to those who are or soon will be serving in ministry?
2. Considering the settings and locations where abuse took place, what precautions should priests and other church leaders take about where they meet young people?
3. What other safeguards should dioceses put in place to deter abuse in and around parishes?
4. What are the major differences between fixated and regressed sexual offenders?
5. What differentiates situational from preferential offenders?
6. How do clergy sex offenders differ from the general population of sex offenders?
7. How can those responsible for the care of children and young people be made more aware of the characteristics of grooming behavior and how to respond when it occurs?
8. What are the essential ingredients of educational programs that dioceses should have in place to help prevent sexual abuse?
9. What are some of the relevant factors to be aware of at the onset of abuse?
10. How do the excuses and justifications for sexual abuse affect the persistence of the behavior?
11. What are some ways supervisors can more readily detect abuse?

**Titles of Slides and References**

N-1: Module N

N-2: Understanding Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests: Situational Factors, Organizational Factors, Types of Offenders, Grooming, and Excuses, Justifications, and Desistance from Abuse

N-3: Main Sources of Data

N-4: Part I. Situational Factors: Settings and Circumstances of Sexual Abuse

N-5: Settings Where Victims First Met Priests Who Abused Them

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 108

N-6: A. Church/Parish Related

N-7: B. Teacher/School Related

N-8: C. Home of Victim or Relative of Victim

N-9: D. Other Institutions

N-10: Physical Locations of Abuse

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 109

N-11: A. Church/Parish Related

N-12: B. Residences

N-13: C. Other Locations

N-14: Circumstances/Timing of Abuse

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 110

N-15: A. Church/Parish Related

N-16: B. Social Event/Other Recreation

N-17: C. Other

N-18: Part II. Organizational Factors Relating to Abuse

N-19: Priest’s Primary Duty or Role at Time of Abuse

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 111

N-20: A. Pastoral/Parish Role

N-21: B. Other Clerical Role

N-22: C. School/Teaching Role

N-23: D. Other

N-24: Part III. Typologies of Abuse

N-25: A. The Fixated/Regressed Typology

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 154, 174, 196

Figure 1

National Child Sexual Abuse Rate, 1992-2001



Sexual Abuse Rate per 100,000 Child Population

Groth, A.N., Hobson, W.F. and Gary, T.S. (1982). The child molester: Clinical observations. In J. Conte and D.A. Shore (Eds.). Social Work and Child Sexual Abuse. New York; Haworth.

N-26: Fixated Offenders: Definition

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 174, 191

American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSMIV-TR. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

N-27: Regressed Offenders: Definition

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 174, 176

N-28: B. FBI Typologies: Situational Offenders, 1

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 177, 197

Holmes, R.M. and Holmes, S.T. (1996). Profiling Violent Crimes: An Investigative Tool. Thousand Oaks, CA; Sage Publications.

N-29: FBI Typologies: Preferential Offenders, 2

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 177, 197

Holmes, R.M. and Holmes, S.T. (1996). Profiling Violent Crimes: An Investigative Tool. Thousand Oaks, CA; Sage Publications.

N-30: C. Personality Characteristics of Clergy Offenders, 1

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 180-181, 202

Plante, T.G., Manuel, G., & Bryant, C. (1996). Personality and cognitive functioning among hospitalized sexual offending Roman Catholic priests. Pastoral Psychology, 45, 129-139.

N-31: Personality Characteristics of Clergy Offenders, 2

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p, 181

Irons, R. & Laaser, M. (1994). The abduction of fidelity: Sexual exploitation by clergy-Experience with inpatient assessment. Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity, 1, 119-129.

Most of the individuals in the sample met the diagnosis for personality disorders with features of antisocial/psychopathic traits or paranoid, sadistic, or schizoid features. The results also illustrate that narcissistic and dependent traits clustered and modeled together in an exploitive manner.

For results of other studies, see *Nature and Scope*, pp. 180-181.

N-32: Onset of Abuse, 3: Overcoming External Factors that May Prevent Abuse

from Occurring

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 99

Grooming is a premeditated behavior intended to manipulate the potential victim into complying with the sexual abuse.437 Pryor describes several methods by which child sexual abusers approach and engage their victims in sexual behavior, including verbal and/or physical coercion, seduction, games, and enticements.438 He explains how they are able to manipulate their victims into sexual compliance and how offenders either continue the manipulation or adjust it in order to continue with the abuse.

N-33: D. Grooming Behavior

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 102, 202

The tactics used by offenders depend somewhat on the potential victim’s response to the tactic. If an offender encounters little to no resistance from the potential victim, he will continue to use the same tactic repeatedly. If, however, some resistance is encountered, the offender may either change the tactic and/or become more forceful in his endeavor.

Pryor, D.W. (1996). Unspeakable Acts: Why Men Sexually Abuse Children. New York: New York University Press.

N-34: Grooming 2, Seduction and Testing of a Child

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

N-35: Grooming 3, Emotional Manipulation and Verbal Coercion

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

N-36: Grooming 4, Catching the Victim by Surprise

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172; *Causes and Context*, p. 103

N-37: Grooming 5, Using Verbal or Physical Force

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

N-38: Grooming 6, Disguising Sexual Advances

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

The most methodical and deliberate tactic of engaging a victim in sex involves a process of initially introducing the victim to the idea of sex and then gradually engaging them in sexual activity. Pryor describes this tactic as turning the victim out. For example, the offender will begin by displaying himself in the nude or introducing the victim to pornography. Then there is a period of rationalizing that sex is okay. This may be followed by fondling the victim or having the victim fondle him, all the while rationalizing that sex is okay and possibly verbally praising the victim for his/her efforts. This exchange slowly builds up to more serious sexual acts and possibly to the point where the victim is being rewarded with gifts for his/her participation.

N-39: Grooming 7, Using Alcohol and Drugs

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 103

N-40: Grooming 8, Building Relationships with the Families of the Victims

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 103

N-41: Grooming 9, Effects of Grooming over Time

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 173

When offenders set out to groom a victim, they will usually use tactics that have previously proved successful in gaining their victim’s compliance. However, given that offenders attend to their victim’s response, they are open to changing their tactics if an approach proves unsuccessful.

N-42: Part IV: Excuses for Behavior, Justifications for Behavior, and Desistance from Abuse

N-43: Excuses for Behavior, 1: Denial of Responsibility

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 105

Some accused priests relied on clinical or psychological explanations for their deviant behavior. A common excuse for offending was sexual immaturity. The priests alluded to what they had lost (their active ministry), rather than recognizing the harm done to the accuser. In this explanation, they also showed a lack of victim empathy. In addition to the sexual immaturity, they also expressed emotional immaturity. The priests talked about seeking excessive emotional closeness with parishioners generally (such closeness with parishioners is not considered appropriate for priests), and they also explained that their emotional needs were not met by peer priests. Other priests explained that abuse is really no one person’s fault, because it is either a disease of the mind, a misunderstanding about what is appropriate, or the result of retarded psychosexual development.

N-44: Excuses for Behavior, 2: Denying the Victim

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 105-107

N-45: Excuses for Behavior, 3: Denying the Victim

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 107

It was evident that the “bad self,” or the sinner, was not engaged as an identity belonging to the priest, but was instead some other disavowed self. Similar to the excuses in which priests denied their own culpability, the accused priests, even when admitting that sexually inappropriate events occurred, did not always identify the actions as abusive. Accused priests expressed the sentiment that had the family not included them in their lives, or if the family of the victim was not so broken, or even if the victim was not so intimately forward, none of these things would have happened. Without such circumstances, the priests argued, no sexual interaction would have taken place and therefore no allegations.

In these cases, everyone else but the accuser was a victim of the sexual abuse. Denying the victim’s identity therefore allowed the accused priests to absolve themselves of the status of abuser.

N-46: Justifications for Behavior, 1

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 107-108

In these cases, the accusers may have been the media, church hierarchy (bishops), parishioners, or families of the victims. This technique overlaps with the appeal to a higher authority, particularly if the priest had sought and felt that he had been given forgiveness.

Although excuses allowed the priests to accept that they committed particular acts, the justification framework suggests that what was done was something for which the priests can be forgiven by God (appeal to a higher authority or loyalty), was not really harmful to the victim or others (denial of harm), and/or was not the real problem (condemning the condemners). All of these techniques are deflective and allowed the priests to deny that they did anything objectionable, whereas the excuses allowed them to admit that they engaged in wrongful acts, but such acts were not their fault.

N-47: Justifications, 2: Minimization of Harm

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 112-113

It is important to note that many instances of sexual abuse did occur at a time in social history (late 1960s to early 1980s) when there was little or developing knowledge around the concepts of sexual violation, victimization, and long-term impact of sexual victimization. Priests may have been uncomfortable with their actions but would not have viewed them as criminal or harmful.

It is valid that a bulk of the events did occur decades before reporting, which made it easier for the priests to minimize or deny the harm that was caused. The priests rationalized that if there had been harm, the abuse would have been reported sooner. Another technique of minimizing harm employed by some of the accused priests was to call the interaction between the accuser and the accused something other than an abusive interaction. The language suggested that the interaction occurred as a part of a friendship or relationship, be it romantic or even a relationship with the family. Accused priests employing this justification of their actions explained that they had contact with the victims through harmless encounters or invited relationships, such as socializing with the family of the victim. Several priests with allegations of abuse had established relationships between themselves and the victims’ families.

N-48: Justifications, 3: Condemning the Condemners

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 113

These respondents ignored their own abusive behavior and simply focused on the behavior of church leadership. This technique is known as “condemning the condemners.”

N-49: Justifications, 4: Condemning the Condemners

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 113, 115

N-50: Justification, 5: Condemning the Condemners

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 115

N-51: Justification, 6: Inadequate Seminary Preparation

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 115

The problem, as it appeared to the accused priests, was the failure of church leaders to adequately train them for the priesthood, particularly the loneliness and isolation therein. Some priests who were not isolated expressed that they were emotionally, psychologically, and sometimes physically abused by their pastors, especially in their early assignments. They experienced a shock in making the transition from the supportive communal seminary setting to the more isolated and difficult experiences of active ministry.

N-52: Deviance Disavowal: Appealing to a Higher Authority

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 108, 112

N-53: Desistance from Abuse, 1: Why Abuse Stopped

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 116

Survivor surveys and information from public documents lead to a more situational explanation for the desistance from abusive behavior. Many of the victims said that abuse ceased when they removed themselves from the abusive situations. In other words, they removed themselves from the situations in which they were being abused, and the priests no longer had the opportunities to abuse them. Often, however, the abuse had continued for a period of time before the victims could determine a way in which to remove themselves from the abusive situation.

N-54: Desistance from Abuse, 2: Why Abuse Stopped

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 116

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N-55: Summary

N-56: Discussion Questions, 1

N-57: Discussion Questions, 2

N-58: Discussion Questions, 3

**Sources**

This module and others prepared for use in seminaries and schools of theology are based primarily on the two reports presented to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops by the John Jay College Research Team, The City University of New York: *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States*, 1950-2010, March, 2011 and *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950-2002*, February 2004.

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