

Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Theological Perspective

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Childhood sexual abuse affects the adult survivor on many levels. As stated in *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: “It is from sex that the human person receives the characteristics which, on the biological, psychological and spiritual levels make that person a man or woman, and thereby largely conditions his or her progress towards maturity and insertion into society.”

Given the significance of sexuality for developing a sense of identity, sexual abuse of children will affect their adult lives on a foundational level. It affects not only their psychological development, but their spiritual development as well.

The theological issues faced by adult survivors are many and complex. Rather than attempt to deal with all of these issues, I have chosen to focus on how having been sexually abused as a child later affects the adult’s concept of God. I will begin by looking at Scripture and will then proceed to examine the psychological and social factors affecting the adult survivor. Then I will focus on the adult survivors themselves, their image of God and the consequent implications for ministry.

SEXUALITY IN SCRIPTURE

Sexuality is seen in scripture as a good gift of God’s creation. In Genesis we see how God created two distinct sexual beings in God’s image and likeness (1:27). We further see how men and women were created for companionship, that they join to become one body and that there is no shame in this (2:18-25). This same theme of man and woman becoming one is echoed by Jesus in both Mark (10:6-8) and Matthew (19:4-7) and expanded by Paul in Ephesians (5:23-33) where he instructs husbands to love their wives as they love their own body. Jesus in his Incarnation as a whole sexual being is a sign of the goodness of the whole human person in the embodiment of God’s love for us. Philip Keane, SS, in his book *Sexual Morality* states: “We can confidently assert that our belief in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ supports the goodness and comprehensive character of human sexuality.”

As with all God’s gifts, sexuality can be misused, “In a sinful world, all of God’s gifts can be misused, with God’s greater gifts to us such as sexuality being subject to greater misuse” (Keane, *Sexuality Morality*). Sexuality is a great gift to us but it is meant to be used within certain limits. As Vincent Genovesi states in his article “Sexuality” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, “Scripture endorses heterosexual, monogamous, permanent and procreative marital relationships as the normative context for physical sexual expression.”

There are many prohibitions in Scripture in the area of sexuality (Lev. 8). While there is mention of incidents of rape and incest in the Bible (rape of Tamar, David’s daughter, 2 Sam. 13:1-14; Lot’s daughters, Gen. 19:30-37) nowhere have I been able to find mention of incidents of sexual

abuse of children. This does not mean it didn't happen. It may be that it was not considered significant for the time. In Deuteronomy 22:23-29 the rape of a maiden is condemned. The maiden may have been a girl of ten or eleven. According to Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Children are not named in the legislation, and later interpretation did not even count the assault of a girl child less than three years old" ("Theological Perspectives on Sexual Violence": in *Sexual Assault and Abuse: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals*, Mary Pellauer, Barbara Chester, Jan Boyajian, editors).

Regardless of whether child sexual abuse was actually occurring or not, it is safe to say that such abuse is contrary to the Scriptures. "Scripture definitively rejects all dehumanizing forms of sexuality such as sexual cruelty, rape or prostitution" (Keane, *Sexual Morality*). Moreover if you look at the prophets and the special care Yahweh has for the little ones, for widows and orphans (Jer. 7:6, 22:3; Ex. 22:7; Zec. 7:10; Is. 1:17), as well as look at Jesus' whole attitude toward children (Mt. 19:13-15; Mk. 10:13-16), it is clear that any violence to these little ones violates God's plan for this world. Also, in speaking of a future time when God's reign will prevail, the prophets described a time when "none shall hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord" (Is. 65:26). This not only speaks of a future time, but it also tells what our world would be like if all lived according to God's ways.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS

Childhood sexual abuse is defined by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect as the following:

Contacts or interactions between a child and an adult when the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or another person. Sexual abuse may also be committed by a person under the age of eighteen when that person is either significantly older than the victim or when the perpetrator is in a position of power or control over another child.

It is significant to note that the child is used by another who has power or control. The needs of the child are disregarded and the child is unable to defend him/herself.

There is a tremendous amount of denial in regards to the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse, particularly in cases of incest. Perhaps this is because it is a violation of a sacred trust between adult and child. Society looks on such actions with abhorrence and so offenders are reluctant to come forward for help.

A child often represses memories of abuse because these memories are too painful and strong and evoke many overpowering feelings that they cannot handle. When such memories start to come back there is till a sense of unreality associated with them. It may be hard for the adult to believe they actually happened. There is a strong desire on the part of the adult survivor to deny that the events happened and at the same time a need to accept and recognized the truth. Furthermore, society's strong denial has kept the reality of abuse a well kept secret.

Evidence of this strong tendency towards denial is mentioned in Freud's work. Alice Huskey, in her book, *Stolen Childhood*, states that Freud, "told his professional colleagues in 1896 that childhood sexual trauma was the cause of every case of hysteria in *Aetiology of Hysteria* and *Studies on Hysteria* . . . Also, Freud himself witnessed autopsies of children who had been sexually abused." Faced with the opposition of his colleagues, Freud recanted his earlier findings and developed his theory about the Oedipal complex.

While we don't know how far back in history sexual abuse goes, the cyclic nature of such abuse would lead one to believe it may have occurred in Biblical times. Often the perpetrators of abuse were abused children themselves. One statistic is that over one-third of incarcerated sex offenders were themselves victimized as children (Barbara Chester "Statistics about Sexual Violence" *Sexual Assault and Abuse*). Mothers of children who are sexually abused by a relative were often abused themselves as a child but are in denial about this and therefore deny their children's abuse. This is not always the case. We need to guard against making blanket statements to this effect as it further stigmatizes the adult survivor. Still, it happens frequently enough to lead us to believe that this problem has been with us for a long time. Also, current statistics indicate that incidents of childhood sexual abuse are much higher than previously believed and thus pose a significant challenge to our society to address. "Much work, often done even before the recent wave of interest and research but ignored at the time, found that between one in five to one in three girls, and between one in ten and one in five boys are at risk for sexual abuse" (Chester, "Statistics about Sexual Violence").

How people are affected by such abuse is influenced by their age at the time of the abuse, the duration of the abuse (one time or many times over years), the relationship of the abuser to the child, and the relationship of significant others to the child. If the children are able to turn to significant people in their life and are believed and supported by them, the affect of the trauma will be lessened.

On the subject of sexual abuse of children, we should remember that adults tend to have higher levels of trauma vis-à-vis sexual matters than do children. Thus a great deal of the child's ability to come through a sexual abuse incident without permanent psychological difficulties will depend on the attitude of the child's parents and other adults (pastors, teachers, etc.) who may have contact with the child (Keane, *Sexual Morality*).

Unfortunately this is not always the case, particularly in cases of incest. Often the children feel doubly victimized if they are not believed when they tell others. For example, children who are sexually abused by an uncle or father may be equally angry at their mother whom they expected to protect them, especially if their mother does not believe them.

Some of the symptoms adult survivors experienced as related by Florence Littauer in *Lives on the Mend* include depression, anger, nightmares, migraines, eating disorders, critical spirit, obesity, sex problems, gaps in memory. Because their sexual boundaries have been blurred or destroyed, adult survivors will have inappropriate sexual boundaries. They may go from the extreme of promiscuity, having no sexual boundaries, to frigidity or having rigid boundaries or

denying any sexual feelings. Often adult survivors may go into ministry, social work or another helping profession in an effort to make up for how dirty they feel inside. Littauer goes on to state, “she may be a confident overachiever who is subconsciously working her way to heaven to make up for the bad feelings she has about her victimization.” They may be withdrawn and isolated with low self-esteem. They also may have a false sense of guilt and tend to accept guilt for things they aren’t responsible for. As one woman in Huskey’s book related:

I frequently found myself responding to altar calls to rededicate my life to Jesus Christ. I really wondered if I had committed the unpardonable sin and was doomed forever! My goals became pleasing God and people by protection and service.

My constant asking God for forgiveness had been futile because I did not need forgiveness. Satan had tricked me into false guilt.

There is also an impaired ability to trust and a confusion as to sexual identity.

As we can see from the aforementioned, the affects of childhood sexual abuse on the adult are far-ranging. They also have spiritual implications “Most victims experience spiritual damage as well” (Huskey, *Stolen Childhood*). I would now like to focus on one aspect of this spiritual damage.

CONCEPT OF GOD

There are a wide range of images of God found in Scripture. The Old Testament abounds with beautiful images of God in nature: God as wind (Ez. 37:9-10); Fire (Ex. 13:21-22); Earth (Dt. 32:18); Water (Is. 27:2-3, 41:18, 44:3-4, 55:1, 58:11; Rev. 22:17); God as eagle (Dt. 32:11-12, Ex 19:4); as mother bear and lion (Hos. 13:8). God is also seen as Wisdom-Sophia (Prov. 3:18; Wis. 7:24, 7:27; Lk. 11:49). God is seen as both male (the father in the prodigal son, Lk. 15:11-31; good shepherd, Jn. 10:14) and female (giving birth Is. 42:14; John 16:31; Rom. 8:26-29; nursing mother Hos. 11:3-4; woman searching for what is lost Lk. 15:8-10). In John’s gospel Jesus refers to himself as: living water (4:13-14; 7:37); bread of life (6:35-58); Light of the world (9:5, 8:12); true vine (15:1-8).

In the midst of these Jesus taught us to call God Abba-Father. The tenderness, beauty and intimacy of this appellation was such that over time it seemed to become “the” way to refer to and image God. While this is a beautiful image it is still just one of many and it has its limitations as do all images of God.

Normally developing children have an early image of God by the time they are five. This image is usually based on those closest to them, either mother or father or whomever is significant in those early years. As an adult this particular image or concept of God has many emotions attached to it. It is important for the adult to recognize what this early image is and then move beyond it to grow spiritually. Adult survivors have special difficulties in this area. Alice Huskey surveyed a group of female students at a Christian liberal arts college and found: “More abused than non-abused person had no distinct feelings about God at the time of becoming Christians”

(*Stolen Childhood*). Huskey also found that “such a person often rejects God the Father because he is seen as the Overpowering one rather than the all powerful one.”

There are no published studies of the correlation between sexual abuse and the concept of God that I know of. I conducted my own survey but it was very limited in nature. Of the sixty surveys sent out I received only seven back. While this is not enough to make any statistical determinations, the comments were interesting. It certainly warrants a more thorough study with comparisons to other; cross sections of the population.

Some responses to this survey as well as quotes from adult survivors in books would indicate a particular difficulty with the concept of God as father.

How could God be like a Father? As far as I could tell, father did bad things (Martha Janssen, *Don't Tell Mother*” *Sexual Assault and Abuse*).

My view of God, especially as a loving Father, was distorted by my perception of my earthly father (Huskey, *Stolen Childhood*).

The educated part of me insists that the Almighty is a good father who can be trusted. The emotionally arrested five year old in me is willing to take few gambles on the “goodness” of our heavenly father (survey respondent, male WASP, 4 years old at time abuse first occurred, abuser-father).

These survivors seem to gravitate towards an image of God as spirit, higher power (twelve step groups) or love.

The Holy Spirit moved me to live (Martha Janssen, “Don't Tell Mother”).

Five years ago the Holy Spirit began to call out the five year old ... I'm still alive and the Spirit isn't done with me yet (respondent to survey, same as above).

Those I meet with as a counselor or as a pastoral minister have simple, childlike God images or more often, no seemingly developed God awareness at all. Those in support groups have images of God described in twelve step “talk”, but more often these days “new age” talk (Therapist respondent to survey).

Adult survivors have a deep need for a healing spirituality. “Finding the spiritual part of yourself can be an important aspect of your healing process,” according to Ellen Bass and Laura Davis in their book, *The Courage to Heal*. This is supported by Patricia Wilson-Kastner, “Recovering a sense of God's presence will restore a core of health and wholeness ...” (“Theological Perspectives on Sexual Violence”, *Sexual Assault and Abuse*). Often they can be helped to find this through nature and other images of God rather than father or mother. As Mary Pellauer states in her article, “Theological Perspectives on Sexual Assault”: “Simply to replace half of the

‘father’ references for God with ‘mother’ however will not begin to resolve these issues, for incest victims also feel anger at mothers for having failed to protect them” (*Sexual Assault and Abuse*).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

What, then, are the implications for ministry? One is that there needs to be a wider range of images of God encouraged in our churches and less dependence on God as Father. This would be helpful for any adults who were abused as children not just sexually abused. It saddens me to see how these adults struggle to try to have some concept of God as Father rather than accept other images of God. It may be helpful for the adult survivor to take the step beyond God as their father/mother/abuser, to God as God truly is; but for some the damage is so great it may not ever be possible. One respondent, quoted earlier as having intellectual concept of God as a good father which doesn’t coincide with his emotional concept, still struggles to bring these two together. “There has been some movement toward integration, but agreement between the adult and child seems at times impossible. The theory is all on the adult side, the facts favor the child.”

An additional problem I see is that of an all male clergy in dealing with these survivors. At times it may be helpful to have clergy the same sex as the abuser to help individuals learn to relate to males in a safe manner with healthy boundaries. However there are also times when it may be necessary for the survivor to relate to clergy of the opposite sex of their abuser. This is especially evident in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For a woman who was sexually abused by a man to receive this sacrament and be in a position of vulnerability with a man may be very painful, like reliving the abuse. While these individuals are able to find forgiveness through other avenues, there still is that loss of this sacramental avenue for forgiveness and healing. In order to be pastorally sensitive to the needs of these individuals I believe the Catholic Church needs to look at its ban on a female clergy.

CONCLUSION

The effects of childhood sexual abuse on adult survivors are far-ranging; they encompass all aspects of their lives. The number of adults who had experienced such abuse as children is far greater than many may want to believe. They constitute a significant percentage of the population. The Catholic Church needs to be pastorally sensitive to the special spiritual needs of these individuals. We must be careful lest a limited view of God as Father and insistence on all male clergy keep these individuals from the experience of God’s love and healing power which they so desperately need.

(Addendum – Since the publication of this article in 1993, I have since gone on to receive my Doctorate in Ministry. My doctoral thesis furthered this study on how childhood sexual abuse affects adult images of God. As part of my research I devised a God Concept Survey which I widely distributed to the general population and to a select group of Adult Survivors. This survey supported the initial conclusions in this article about how being sexually abused as a child affects how survivors see God.)

