

Sexual Abuse Of Women and Girls By Clergy

BY SUSAN ARMSTRONG

Over the course of the last two years, newspaper articles and news broadcasts have been full of stories about abuse of young boys by members of the Roman Catholic Church. These reports lead us to believe that the victim-survivors are exclusively male, the incidence rare, and that the church is actively responding to victim-survivors' needs. Unfortunately these are myths. What is missing in these revelations and public outcry is the story of female victim-survivors. Women and girls have been and continue to be silenced within the churches; their experiences of childhood sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape by clergy have not been acknowledged or responded to.

Due to lack of research, we do not have concrete numbers regarding incidence of sexual abuse by clergy. One self report study performed in the U.S. reported that 12 per cent of the 300 clergy who responded, reported having had sexual intercourse with their parishioners.¹ Out of all the professional groups responding in the study, clergy reported the *highest* rate of sexual involvement with clients. The incidents revealed in the media thus far — Mount Cashel, Alfred Reformatory School and sexual abuse in native residential schools in Manitoba and British Columbia — represent the tip of the iceberg. From speaking with survivors, it is clear that the majority of cases never become public. They are not disclosed, or once disclosed, blocked in some way by church hierarchy.

Women's experiences of sexual abuse by clergy have not been revealed for a number of reasons. There is no safe place to disclose the abuse we endured at the hands of men who were supposed to be our spiritual keepers. One media article reported on a woman's

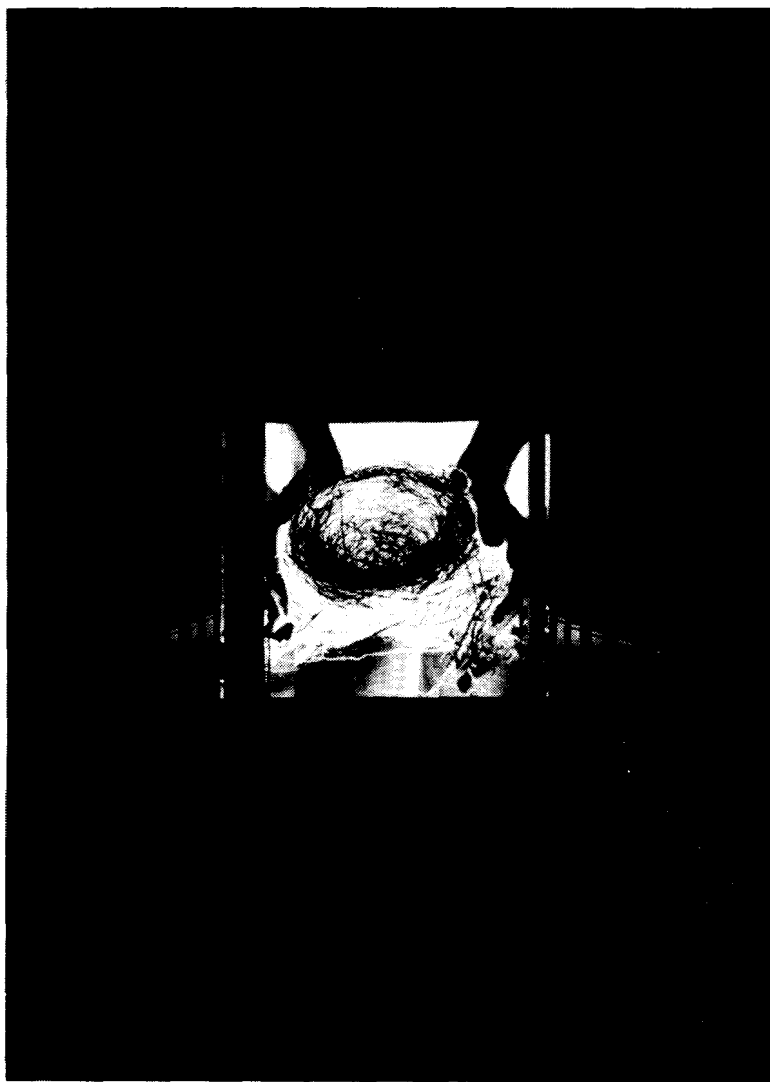
attempt over *nineteen months* to obtain an official chastisement of her abuser through the Baptist church. At the time of the article, the church was "considering her requests" and explained the delay with: "There were a lot of discrepancies in her story" and "he did not know there was 'a sense of urgency' about the case."² With the exception of the native residential schools, girls and women have been abused in isolation and forced to come forward on their own. We are forced to disclose to male enclaves — the police or the church — and risk disbelief or blame. Secrecy is expected in any incidence of sexual abuse, and this secrecy is more enforced when the perpetrator is the representative of God. The struggle over disclosure is made painfully clear in this survivor's account:

For a long time my abuse happened Sunday mornings. Then,

we'd go to church...it's happening in the rectory in front of the crucifix where I'd be looking at Jesus. Is this just suffering that I'm supposed to be taking on? Why is Jesus allowing this? Why is God allowing this? Am I bad? Then, I see my parents very pious and kneeling down to the church, to this man. Everyone's looking up at this man as if he's God. How could I ever say anything?³

As story after story reveals, if and when a survivor does speak out, it is unlikely she will be believed, or if believed, she is likely to be blamed.

A second news article provides a short description of the \$200,000 compensation award a woman received after having been sexually abused at the age of fourteen by a parish priest.⁴ The priest pleaded guilty to a sexual assault charge and received a *one year suspended* sentence, requiring him to work in an American prison. After his



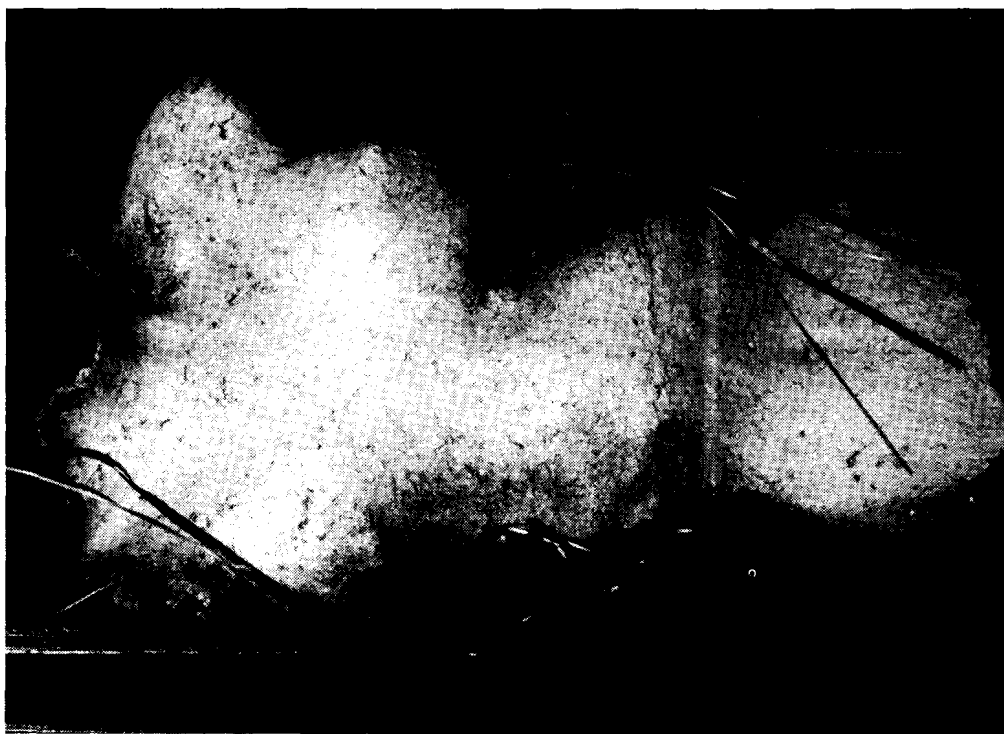
Penny Stewart, "She Who is Veiled" (1990). Exhibited in *Healing Images*, Toronto.

year was completed, he returned to the same parish and resumed duties as a pastor. When supporters of the woman picketed his return, the priest responded with a lawsuit which was eventually dismissed. The church and its community's response was to ostracize this woman and her supporters. The church as a whole colludes in the conspiracy of silence and denial. It makes itself unavailable to the victim-survivor and fails to call the priest to account for his actions.

The silencing of women is effective on several levels: language, policy and theology. Discussion of sexual abuse by clergy generally presumes that victim-survivors are male. Thus the head of an advisory group on sexual abuse by clergy was quoted in *The Toronto Star* as saying, "I would suggest that the majority of victims are far from ready to risk and deal with the trauma and publicity of disclosure..."

In such cases, it is still not socially acceptable for *males* to acknowledge pain publicly⁵ (emphasis added). The Winter Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy defined sexual abuse as follows, "...involvement of *male* children in any form of sexual activity with members of Roman Catholic clergy"⁶ (emphasis added). The church has excluded women in its definition of the problem.

Each diocese is responsible for its own policies regarding disclosure and subsequent investigation of sexual abuse. The lack of uniformity in how these policies and procedures are carried out is effective in silencing a victim-survivor and protecting the church's own. Some Catholic dioceses do not have a sexual abuse policy despite the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops' order in December 1987 that all dioceses adopt the council's guidelines or develop their own. The Archdiocese of St. John's in Newfoundland developed official protocol regarding allegations of sexual abuse by clergy in March 1990; two and a half years *after* public disclosure of sexual abuse by some of St. John's clergy and *fifteen* years after the first complaint was made to the archbishop. This lack of formalized procedure results in one person, usually the Archbishop,



Carolyn Van Huyse, detail of *"Internally Contaminated"* (1990). Exhibited in *Healing Images*, Toronto. In a wooden chest of drawers lies a delicate paper-cast female torso branded with a German saying, "Everything burns including art."

having absolute control over how a victim-survivor's disclosure is handled. Where policies do exist they are woefully inadequate. Victim-survivors are often not informed of the results of an inquiry, the alleged abuser's word is often sufficient to warrant dropping the investigation, and disclosure of the investigation's findings to the larger faith community is never advised. Some policies have processes that involve lawyers and witnesses to ascertain the validity of the allegation only after it has been perceived as worthy of an inquiry. The policies are clearly concerned with protecting their own, and silencing the victim-survivor. This silencing is apparent in one woman's experience of disclosure: "I was really traumatized speaking to him [superior of religious order] on the phone. After I hung up, I realized I'd been bought off. It wasn't very much money (\$1000) to silence me. He [superior] said, 'Well, you're not going to make this public or anything? You're not going to press charges, are you?'" Is it surprising that so few women have disclosed their abuse to the male clergy who have the power to dismiss their disclosure as being without merit?

Another factor that silences women within the Catholic Church is their theology regarding woman and the exclusion of women in the structure of the church. A

woman brought up in the Catholic church has inherited the guilt of Eve, the seductress, and can foresee all too well how her allegations may be received. Most Catholic girls have been told the story of St. Maria Goretti who lost her life to her rapist and was canonized for the active defence of her virginity and her forgiveness of the attacker. Thus the representation of girls and women in the Catholic Church is either seductress or virgin; damaging "choices" for a girl or woman being abused by her pastor. The priest in his celibate, self-sacrificial role, is regarded as God-like and indeed has been accorded as much power and authority. The abuse of women and children is an outgrowth of the power relationships within the church structure. Women have been excluded from leadership in the patriarchal church. Obedience to male and priestly authority, and servitude and chastity have been enduring lessons for women. The church teaches that women are subordinates, and women and children are male property rather than persons. Such teachings reinforce an environment where sexual abuse can occur, and ensure the continuation of silence.

One survivor of sexual abuse by clergy sums up the situation like this:

Sexual abuse will continue as long as there is a hierarchical church, as long

as there are men in charge, as long as there is enforced celibacy. Celibacy isn't the cause of sexual abuse in the church but it doesn't help... The way the Catholic Church is structured it attracts people who are power-oriented, who, basically, are warped; who are looking for people to bend their knees to them.

The lack of research in this area means that incidence levels are basically unknown and effects of sexual abuse by clergy unexplored. I suggest the effects of clergy sexual abuse are distinct relative to other forms of sexual abuse, particularly when the victim-survivor is a child. Religious institutions have traditionally been seen as places of safety and caring. The portrayal of the church as a safety haven headed by God's representatives results in immense spiritual and psychological harm for victim-survivors of clergy sexual abuse. The self-blame so common in sexual abuse is intensified by the perpetrator's "godly" position. Children may believe that God is punishing them for their sins or bad behaviour. The family's adherence to church teachings and respect for the abuser may be perceived as condoning the abuse a child suffers. Often victim-survivors feel they must leave the church they once believed in, their faith in the priest, institution and sometimes God crushed:

I decided to leave the Church. This was very, very painful to do. I was very angry that I was being forced out of the Church, that there was not a place for me... that they would not allow a place, not only for a survivor but for a feminist. There's no place for women in the Catholic Church as far as I am concerned, and there certainly wasn't a place for me.

The despair and loss is evident in the following statement:

So, my family still doesn't talk about it. They've told a few friends but no one ever mentions it to me... They believe I'll get over this and come back to the church. I'm no longer in contact with them... As a survivor, I think you pay and pay and pay. I don't know where it will end. I'm the one who has lost my

family. I'm the one who has lost my childhood. I'm the one who has lost money in trying to pay for counselling.

Given the silencing of women and protection of clergy, and the gross injustice children and women experience within the church, what is the direction we need to take? Canadian research is desperately needed to gauge the incidence of sexual abuse by clergy, the effects of abuse on victim-survivors and to formulate just responses to the needs of the victim-survivors. I hope to undertake this research in the coming year, providing women with an opportunity to have their voices heard and to state what jus-

The lack of research in this area means that incidence levels are basically unknown and effects of sexual abuse by clergy unexplored.

tice would look like for them. This information must be disseminated to the public to eradicate the myths mentioned at the beginning of this article. On the basis of what victim-survivors share with us, we must challenge the church's presumed right to direct inquiries into sexual abuse without outside involvement or accountability. From my own experience of clergy sexual abuse and those of women I have encountered, I expect victim-survivors will call not only for procedural changes, but a complete restructuring of the church and a restating of theology.

There has been some movement in this direction from the church community, particularly with the Winter Report, and due to the efforts of native communities. The Winter Report reflected an understanding of the need to hear and respond to those who have been violated and produced a thorough list of recommendations. We now have the responsibility to challenge the St. John's archdiocese to implement these recommendations. Na-

tive communities have mobilized themselves in gathering their own data and confronting the church with the long list of abuses suffered in native residential schools. These communities need our support as they challenge slow church bureaucracy and denial.

The problem is multi-faceted and church response slow and inadequate. I wish to see the time when sexual abuse by clergy is eradicated, but given the magnitude of change required to accomplish this, the needs of those children and women already harmed must be addressed by the church and by society as a whole. This opportunity to speak out is the beginning of change and healing for me. I hope all my sisters will have the same opportunity and a safe place to do the speaking they need to do.

¹ Blackman's study cited in Schoener, Gary R. *et al* (eds.), *Psychotherapists' Sexual Involvement with Clients: Interventions and Prevention*. (Minneapolis: Walk-In Counselling Centre, 1987).

² "Confronting Personal Demons." *The Toronto Star*, 28 Dec. 1989.

³ Quotations of survivors are taken from transcripts of interviews done by the author and two colleagues.

⁴ "Victim of Sexual Assault by Priest Gets \$200,000." *The Toronto Star*, 27 June 1990.

⁵ "Church Structure is Linked to Sex Abuse, Adviser Says." *The Toronto Star*, 15 Dec. 1990.

⁶ *Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy*. Archdiocese of St. John's, 1990, pp. 3-4.

Susan Armstrong is presently a student at OISE in a master's program in Community Psychology and a counsellor at a woman's centre. She was brought up a Roman Catholic and abused by a Religious Brother from age seven to twelve. She plans to commence research in sexual abuse by clergy this summer.

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank Chris Davis and Wendy Roy who collaborated with me on a class project (see note 3) from which this paper grew.