# 10. Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clerics: Patterns of Interpretation and Coping Strategies of Victims in the Light of a Religious Socialisation

*Sandra Fernau*

## *10.1 Introduction*

The phenomenon of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions and communities gained wider public attention after many cases in the United States and Ireland became known beginning in the mid-1990s. In Germany, sexual violence in state and Church institutions came into the focus of public and academic interest following widespread media disclosure of abuse in early 2010. After former pupils of a reform school and a Catholic college first reported their experiences of victimisation, a wave of revelations of sexual abuse in state and Church contexts followed.

Both nationally and internationally, there is a lack of empirical and epidemiological research regarding sexual abuse in institutional and particularly in Church contexts. While much empirical research has been done in past decades on sexual violence in the family environment (see for an overview e.g. Finkelhor 1994, Lampe 2002), there are few international studies on sexual abuse in religious settings. The majority of studies published in this area are from the United States. Most of them are conducted with quantitative methods and from a psychological perspective. In describing child sexual abuse by Catholic clerics, researchers focus on the following aspects: On the one hand they analyse characteristics of the abusers themselves, such as their personality and possible sexual disorders, especially paedophilia and ephebophilia (cf. Laaser 1991, Haywood et al.1996a, Haywood et al. 1996b, Plante/Manuel/Bryant 1996, Doyle 2003, Plante 2003). On the other hand in the past years a few studies have been conducted that describe characteristics of victims, and the spiritual and psychological impact of the abuse, mostly with a focus on trauma symptoms (cf. Bottoms et al. 2003; Benkert & Doyle 2009; Doyle 2009; Carr et al. 2010). Two important large-scale research projects have been conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The first is



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the 'Nature and Scope' report on the prevalence of sexual abuse by Catholic priests and deacons in the years 1950 to 2002. The second is the 'Causes and Context' report, which analyses occurrences of sexual abuse within the Church from a socio-historical and psychological perspective and proposes approaches for explaining the possible causes and backgrounds to the sexual offences (cf. John Jay College Research Team 2004, Terry et al. 2011).

So far there are hardly any victimological studies available that investigate subjective experience of sexual abuse in Church contexts using a qualitative research paradigm. Yet a qualitative approach to the research field, through the reconstruction of subjective patterns of interpretation and strategies for coping with the events, enables to obtain a deeper understanding of the distinguishing features and consequences of experiences of victimisation in religious settings. The present qualitative interview study with victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clerics[1] addresses this desideratum by investigating the individual dynamics and impacts of those experiences of victimisation. The central research aim is to reconstruct biographical patterns of interpretation and attempts to cope with the experiences of abuse and to analyse them in the light of a religious socialisation.

Starting from the assumption that a Catholic upbringing and socialisation shaped the interviewee's personality development and hence their interpretation of victimisation, the approach taken in this paper can be outlined as follows: The definition of the term 'sexual abuse' is followed by a number of reflections from a sociology of religion delineating the influence and role of belief and religious practice at individual level. Next, the research design underlying the study is described together with the structure of the sample of the interview study. Besides the analyses of the subjective reception, this article focusses on the retrospective interpretation and coping with the experiences of abuse, drawing upon basic assumptions relating to religion theory and victimology. In particular, selected interview sequences are used to provide an overview of typical reaction patterns by victims.

1 The term 'Catholic cleric' is used here to refer to Catholic priests (including chaplains and vicars), deacons and male members of religious orders working under the auspices of the German Bishops' Conference.



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## *10.2 Definition of sexual abuse*

Criteria that are important in most definitions of sexual abuse and are applied in this study include the following:

### Types of sexual acts

A first definition criterion relates to the types of sexual acts covered and includes a distinction between acts with and without physical contact (cf. Finkelhor et al. 1990, Dhaliwal et al. 1996, Wetzels 1997). These two categories, however, still cover a very wide range of forms of contact. For this reason, only those acts are classed here under the term 'sexual abuse' that, in a strict sense, directly relate to human sexuality and involve interaction with at least the individual's own or the other's body. This can include sexual activities performed with, in the presence of, or to a child or adolescent.

### Relationship between offender and victim

Most normatively oriented definitions are based on the concept of 'informed consent' first formulated by Schechter and Roberge (1976). This states that children prior to a certain stage of development are not able to fully understand sexual acts and so are unable to appreciate the implications of those acts. They are therefore not capable to enter into consenting sexual relations (cf. Schechter/Roberge 1976, Finkelhor 1979, Wetzels 1997). The structure of the relationship between offender and victim is thus characterised by a competence and power difference in psychological development and social standing – a superiority of the offender. This is almost always accompanied by family interpersonal dependencies or in cases of sexual abuse within the Church by institutional interpersonal dependencies. The developmental and social asymmetry between offender and victim usually makes it unnecessary for the offender to use physical violence, which therefore has to be dropped as a definition criterion for sexual abuse. The same applies to any indication of consent by the victim, as in many cases children are unable to understand, clearly appreciate the significance, or name the acts in question (cf. Finkelhor 1979, Dhaliwal et al. 1996, Wetzels 1997).



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### Age limits and age differences

The power and authority imbalance between offender and victim is generally operationalized by using age limits and age differences, which vary in the relevant studies (cf. Finkelhor et al. 1990, Dhaliwal et al. 1996, Wetzels 1997). In the present study an age limit of 18 is applied as the upper limit for the potential victim group. With regard to age difference, the research field of sexual abuse within the Church invariably shows a significant age gap between offender (cleric) and victim (pupil, child in care, or altar server) that is far greater than the generally utilised age difference of at least five years.

### Offender's intentions and aims in assessment of his conduct

A further common criterion likewise applied in this study is that the offender is motivated in his conduct by the desire for sexual gratification and pleasure. The adult acts here with disregard to the child's or adolescent's will or ability to understand and makes use of his developmental and social superiority to exploit the victim for the gratification of his personal sexual desire for arousal, intimacy or power. Sexual abuse is thus characterised by the sexual instrumentalisation of a child or adolescent by an adult (Baker/Duncan 1985, Wetzels 1997, p. 71f).

Sexual abuse is accordingly defined here as a sexual act, by a person significantly older than the victim, performed with or in the presence of, or to a child or adolescent, in which the offender exploits his superiority in terms of psychological development and social standing to gratify his personal sexual desires.[2]

## *10.3 Functions of religion and the influence of a religious socialisation on victims of sexual abuse*

To investigate the dynamics and impacts of experiences of sexual abuse within the religious context, it is first necessary to present some fundamental reflections delineating the functions of religion and the influence

2 The terms 'sexual assault', 'sexual acts' or 'sexual violence' are used synonymously with the term 'sexual abuse' as just defined.



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of belief and religious practice on the individual. Following classical and contemporary perspectives, religion is defined here as a system of symbols, beliefs, values and practices relating to supernatural beings, things and powers of an otherworldly sphere which are considered as holy. The core element of religion is the question of ultimate meaning – that which goes beyond the natural. As an institutional phenomenon, it prescribes spiritual doctrines and rules of conduct, ethical guidelines and moral ideals (cf. Parsons 1964 , Stark/Glock 1968, Knoblauch 1999, Hamilton 2001, Furseth/Repstad 2006 ).

Important sociological and sociopsychological functions of religion mentioned in numerous publications can be summarised as follows: First of all, religion has an integrative, community-building function. The formation of a religious collective by way of shared beliefs, values and ritualistic, symbolistic community experiences generates a powerful sense of mutual belonging among believers that goes as far as an 'oceanic feeling' ("ozeanisches Gefühl") (Freud 1930, p. 197). This results not only in greater willingness to take an active part in Church life, but likewise in the translation of the individual's egoistic wishes and fears into group objectives (cf. Knoblauch 1999, Hamilton 2001, Furseth/Repstad 2006, Liebsch 2010).

Furthermore, religious concepts serve to legitimize and justify the prevailing system of values and norms by endowing it with sacred significance. Doubts rose about the value consensus – for example in response to crises or threats to society – can thus be allayed by projecting the fulfilment of expectations into a transcendental sphere (cf. Parsons 1964, Knoblauch 1999, Hamilton 2001, Furseth/Repstad 2006).

At individual level, religion wields early and lasting influence on personality formation through internalisation of its system of beliefs, values and symbols in the course of a religious upbringing and socialisation. Alongside messages conveyed in language, religion also affects and deeply influences personality development at a pre-verbal, sensory-symbolic level. Religion thus plays an important part in the constitution of personal identity and its preservation in the face of change (cf. Parsons 1964, Lorenzer 1981, Knoblauch 1999, Furseth/Repstad 2006, Liebsch 2010).

As they result in an individual's experience of the world being interpreted in a way that imparts order and purpose, religious constructs also provide an orientation, interpretation and coping aid for all situations in life. Besides, the interpretation and assignment of purpose to events and personal experience helps to de-dramatize conflicts and defuse dramatic or



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emotionally troubling situations. The resulting encouraging or comforting thoughts lead to reduced stress, discomfort and anxiety. At the same time, especially when it comes to shocking experiences, threats or crises, unfulfilled expectations are projected into a transcendental sphere. The promise of salvation and justice in the afterlife thus compensates feelings of undeserved suffering. An interpretation that gives purpose and meaning to the individual's own actions and to life in general additionally enhances self-esteem and invokes positive feelings such as hope and joy. In this way, religious convictions serve within the individual's intrapsychic emotion and behaviour regulation processes as satisfaction of needs and coping strategies (cf. Parsons 1964, Knoblauch 1999, Grom 2007, Furseth/Repstad 2006, Liebsch 2010).

## *10.4 Method and sample*

The qualitative interview study presented here is part of an ongoing research project at the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony. Between 15 and 20 adult victims (male and female) of sexual abuse by Catholic clerics in Germany will be interviewed using a semi-structured, guideline-based approach. Study participants were recruited in two ways: Firstly, victims were able to make contact themselves by using an email address set up for the purpose. Three interviewees used this channel to say they were willing to take part. Secondly, the prevention commissioners in each diocese were asked to forward a letter from the research institute to potential interviewees known to them.[3] A further 21 victims responded to this appeal, ten of whom were selected for interview on the basis of a questionnaire they completed in advance. Interviewees were selected by a contrasting sampling method with a view to obtaining a heterogenic sample in terms of gender, age and the context of abuse so as to cover the broadest available spectrum of experience, patterns of interpretation and coping strategies.

The research instrument used is a biographical, semi-structured interview guide based with regard to his structure and organisation on the se-

3 As part of a nationwide compensation process after numerous cases of abuse in Catholic institutions and parishes became public, sexual abuse prevention commissioners were appointed in all 27 German dioceses for victims of Catholic clergy to contact.



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mi-structured, guideline-based interview approach according to Helfferich (2009). This uses open questions in a flexible handling order so that interviewees, despite certain prescribed thematic focuses, can narrate within those focuses in monologue form and develop their subjective relevance systems. Starting with two diachronic guiding questions on the interviewees' childhood and youth and on their subsequent biography, the interview guide is organised in five thematic areas, each of which is introduced with open questions: 1. Family upbringing and socialisation, 2. Religious upbringing and socialisation, and contemporaneous experiences of sexual abuse, 3. Partnerships entered into by the victims, 4. Interpretation of and coping with sexual abuse, 5. Significance of religiousness and faith to the interviewees and their attitudes towards the Catholic Church.

The interviews are analysed using a combination of qualitative methods. An initial analysis providing a descriptive overview is primarily based on categorizing methods according to Grounded Theory (cf. Strauss 1987, Strauss/Corbin 1990). A second step, involving the reconstruction of biographical case studies from selected interviews to gain an extended and deeper understanding of phenomena, makes use of hermeneutic methods especially the depth-hermeneutic approach (cf. Lorenzer 1986, Bereswill/Morgenroth/Redman 2010, Salling Olesen/Weber 2012).

Of the 15 to 20 interviews planned with adult victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clerics, 13 have been conducted so far: Three with women and ten with men. These 13 interviews underlie the findings presented here and are characterised as follows: The age of interviewees ranged from 37 to 71, with an average age of 59, meaning that their experiences of victimisation lie several decades in the past. The sexual assaults took place in various contexts, with interviewees experiencing abuse in closed institutions such as children's homes and boarding schools, as altar servers and in private contexts. All acts of abuse that they reported, which differed considerably in their details, involved physical contact; in cases where the abuse was initially without touching, physical contact followed over time. Sexual activities performed with, in the presence of, and to the victims were described. The sexual assaults began when the interviewees were at ages between four and 14. On average, the abuse relationship developed from the age of ten after the entry into altar service and in most cases went on for several years (between one and nine years). There is generally a large age difference between offender and victim, which is probably characteristic for the research field of sexual abuse within the Church. In the



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present sample, the age difference is several decades, and the accused clerics are mostly over the age of 50.

### *10.5 Characteristics of patterns of interpretation and coping attempts of sexual abuse*

The disclosure of traumatic experiences in the course of an interview can be generally understood as a retrospective reorganisation of reality. Within the interview context, victims create a discursive framework for the abuse that was not yet available at the time it took place (Mosser 2009). This applies to a special extent to the interviewees in the current sample: In almost all cases, they first spoke about their experiences of abuse many years later. More than half of the interviewed victims kept silent about the sexual assaults for decades. Only with the broad public disclosure of cases of abuse in state and Church institutions in 2010 did they reveal their own experiences, although in most cases only to very few selected individuals. Some of them haven't told their closer social and family milieu about the abuse to this day.

Closely bound up with these problems of disclosure are specific dynamics of sexual abuse that play an important part in the study participants' accounts and have a lasting influence on their retrospective experience, interpretation and coping with the experiences of abuse. These are predominantly expressed in several ways:

- Fear of stigmatisation and negative reactions by the family and social milieu, and frequently a related fear concerning the anticipated loss of affiliation with the Church community.
- Feelings of shame and guilt leading to self-blaming by victims.
- Trivialisation of the sexual abuse resulting in rejection resp. denial of the individual's own victim status.
- Legitimation of the incidents of abuse by adopting the offender's interpretation.
- 'Sacralisation' of the sexual assault in a religious revaluation of what happened.

In many victims' accounts it is also possible to make out an orientation towards Catholic beliefs that manifests itself in the use of religious vocabulary and recourse to internalised religious patterns of interpretation. With integration into local parish structures, taking part in rituals of the faith



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also plays an important part for some interviewees. Accordingly, a number of interviewees regularly attend Church on Sunday, hold unpaid offices in the parish, and also prayers (such as grace before meals, intercessions, devotions, prayers of repentance) are an integral part of their everyday life. All married victims wed in and had their children baptised into the Catholic Church, and likewise the large majority of their children are or have been altar servants.

In the following, the patterns of interpretation and coping attempts listed above are explored in more detail with special consideration of their specific manifestations in the research field of sexual abuse within the Church.

### *10.5.1 Fear of stigmatisation and of loss of affiliation with the Church community*

The subjective experience, both at that time and now, of a large proportion of the interviewed victims is characterised by fears concerning potential consequences of disclosing their experiences. There is a deep-seated fear of rejection, blame and stigmatisation by the family and social milieu and of an associated loss of affiliation with the family and the Church community. The following two interview sequences from two victims illustrate particularly well the anticipation of negative reactions by the family and social milieu to disclosure of their experiences of abuse:[4]

> "Maybe I thought, if I say that now, then I'll somehow be pitched out of the relationship that after all I still have with my parents, then I'll be marked, then I'll be marked as a black sheep. Then you'll perhaps be, um, that is, I'll then be marked in a negative way. And then there's something terrible that happened to me, something my parents might regard as totally repugnant, and maybe they won't be able to forgive you at all or, um, there's something irreparable, something utterly negative that has happened, and maybe I also didn't want to lose what affection was left and what love was left."

Whereas these words of a 71-year-old man represent a retrospective interpretation of his subjective situation at the time of the abuse and the years

4 The quoted interview passages correspond as closely as possible to the victims' manner of expression in the original, with minor adjustments for the sake of readability prior to translation into English. Omissions resp. truncations are marked with (…).



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that followed, the quotation that follows, from a now 37-year-old female victim, relate to her situation as she currently perceives it:

> "Well, I wouldn't venture anywhere any more, wherever I went they'd be saying, «Look, here she comes, the abuse victim» and the like. Well, that would be very unpleasant for me. And most of all what I'm really thinking about is my children. (…) Well, that's something I'd never expect my children to put up with. (…) That anybody out there would be pointing a finger at my children or at us, no, really. (…) They can say as often as they want that we can't help it really, but I believe people would point at you anyway. You, you're then just stuck with a kind of stigma."

Aside from concealing the abuse for fear of stigmatisation and of being blamed, both accounts show a fear that disclosure of the experiences could mean loss of affiliation. In the first passage in particular, there is evident fear of the anticipated loss of important positive elements of the relationship with the family. This fear is amplified by virtue of the fact that, as priest and hence head of the congregation, the offender held a position of power and authority in the local community that also projected into the interview's family structure. As a moral authority and guardian of virtue, his influence on this family closely integrated into the life of the community appears so great that the interviewee feared his parents would be unable to "forgive" him if the sexual assaults came into the open, that is, that he himself would be apportioned blame for the abuse.

Fear of losing important ties are also characteristic of a number of other victims, who to this day share very active participation in mostly village parish life. They refer most of all to the possibility of being ostracised from the local Church community. In general, the experiences of victimisation are not discussed or addressed in the local religious community. And while some victims reported the experienced sexual violence to the prevention commissioner for their diocese, most of those expressed the desire not to be named, i.e. to maintain their anonymity.

For such victims, any coping with the experiences of abuse in the course of disclosure and actively seeking help in the Church milieu is made difficult due to their religious socialisation and the resulting strong emotional ties and loyalty to the local religious community. A socialisation largely based on collective values makes the potential loss of ties to the Church community as a result of disclosure a predominantly menacing prospect. In this light, disclosure becomes bound up with a decision affecting the future of the victim's own social integration. It presents itself in the eyes of victims as a guilt-bound breaking off of important ties, as betrayal



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of the offender and the community. Hence instead of the fear of family break-up described by Summit (1983) and Crisma et al. (2004) as being characteristic of intrafamilial sexual abuse, fear of a break-up of community affiliations, of losing community support is here at the forefront of victims' subjective experience. In both cases it is the fear of a collapse of elemental relationship structures that give support and security.

### *10.5.2 Self-blaming by victims*

As intimated in the two passages above, the described fears of stigmatisation and loss of affiliation frequently go hand in hand with strong feelings of shame and guilt in victims. These mostly lead to self-accusation, with the victims giving themselves the responsibility for the abuse.

In this sense, the female interviewee quoted above describes her thoughts and feelings towards abuse victims in general and hence also in relation to her own self:

> "You're always somehow a bit, inwardly, um, it strikes you then, well, maybe the victim went around provocatively dressed or maybe wanted it itself or only has himself to blame. I also simply can't get out of that role."

Comparing this passage with what she said further above, it also becomes clear that she directs against herself the negative reactions she fears from others. Her fear of stigmatisation is thus partly a product of and at the same time is compounded by her own self-reproaches.

The following account by a male victim aged 65 at the time of the interview likewise shows a link between fear of negative reactions from his social milieu and his own feelings of shame and guilt. In this case, however, the resulting self-blaming is given a different connotation by being embedded in a religious interpretation:

> "And, and always having to live with this mark of Cain, then they will all go and tell each other about it in the village, they'll talk, after all a village is a small place. And, always living with that, there was something going on between you and the pastor or whatever. (…) That never goes away."

In saying that he carries a "mark of Cain" visible to everyone where he lives, he not only gives expression to a guilt-bound fear of stigmatisation, but simultaneously attaches to that fear a religious, God-willed significance. His choice of words is based on the story of the brothers Cain and Abel in the Old Testament of the Bible (Genesis 4:1-16), in which Cain



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slayed his brother Abel and by way of punishment for the fratricide has a mark set upon him by God that brands him for the rest of his life. This has two meanings: On the one hand, the mark of Cain is the identifying mark of the murderer and hence a stigma. On the other, it is a protective mark identifying Cain as one to be judged by God alone and so saving him from violent death. In Biblical terms, then, it represents the just punishment of an offender by God.

The interviewee thus carries in his own eyes, on account of the experiences of abuse, a mark of guilt and shame that betrays and brands him as a victim. Yet the mark of Cain is not a stigma attributed by people in general or in the victim's social milieu, it is a mark given by God. There is therefore no escape from the role of the branded individual: The victim speaks of "always having to live with this mark of Cain." The interviewee's self-blaming is thus guided by the assumption of having taken upon himself a sin before God. For this reason, the stigma to be carried for that sin manifests itself as just punishment from God for the sexual abuse. Accordingly, his pattern of interpretation displays a role reversal compared with the reality of the abuse situation: The interviewee, as victim, makes himself the offender.

### *10.5.3 Trivialisation of the sexual abuse*

In general, the occurring self-blaming by victims result in most cases from their sense of not having done enough to fend off the abuse – either physically or by avoiding contact with the offender. In this way, many victims still succumb even decades after the assaults to the suggestion of free volition and complicity. This appraisal finds expression, for example, in the passage just quoted through the words "there was something going on between you and the pastor." Another interviewee repeatedly interpreted his contact with the offender as a "relationship." Such manipulation, which is considered characteristic in the context of intrafamilial abuse (cf. Baker/Duncan 1985, Dhaliwal et al. 1996, Bange 2007, Mosser 2009) and leads to a distortion of perception patterns, is likewise inherent to typical abuse situations in the Church context.

In addition to this, especially for some male victims in the sample, self-accusation serves to protect against the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness triggered by the loss of control. By blaming themselves for the abuse, the victims can maintain the illusion of having had at least some



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degree of control in the past situation. The notion that they could have made it better appears to be more easily reconcilable with their male self-image than admitting their total helplessness (cf. Dhaliwal et al. 1996, Bange 2007). Their subjective interpretational scheme thus qualifies the incidents of abuse in a way that does not permit self-classification as victim.

The following two sequences from an interview with a male victim aged 66 illustrate particularly well this way of interpretation and coping:

> "Um, the bad bit, um, the reason I'm sitting here in the first place, actually I completely forgot about it, very quickly, it didn't weigh on me either, like in my childhood or in those experiences."

At the very beginning of the interview, the victim makes clear in his account that the sexual assaults did not weigh on him emotionally even at the time of the abuse. Shortly afterwards he further makes clear that he did not suffer under the experiences in any way in the time that followed either:

> "Well, it's not that I now, um, want to talk about my problems, I didn't have any problem with them. (…) It didn't, um, it didn't handicap me in my development or anything like that. So that's not the case."

As these passages show, this interviewee's coping strategy with the experiences of abuse consists of rejecting the victim status. In a number of publications on the subject, trivialisation and denial of this kind are frequently cited as common coping strategies by male victims of sexual abuse (cf. Finkelhor 1979, Baker/Duncan 1985, Dhaliwal et al. 1996, Bottoms et al. 2003, Benkert/Doyle 2009 Mosser 2009).

### *10.5.4 Religious neutralisation strategies among clergy offenders and their adoption by victims*

The strategies with which offenders succeed in making victims pliant and ensuring that the sexual acts are kept secret play a key part in the establishment of abuse relationships. Embroilment in such relationships can come about in very different ways. The spectrum ranges from gradual, subtle customisation with an atmosphere of harassment through to drastic threats and the use of physical violence, although the last can generally be refrained from due to the social and developmental power differential between offender and victim.



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Within the religious context there are additional, specific offender strategies that may be termed religious manipulation of victims. This consists of making victims pliant by exploiting religious beliefs as an explanation and justification of the sexual assaults. Alongside the gradual and subtle process of establishing the abuse relationship, these strategies supplanted, for all victims, the use of physical violence and at the same time represented a threat of catastrophic consequences in a different guise.

Examples of such religious neutralisation strategies on the part of offenders include the following: First of all, several victims reported sexual acts in the context of confession. The acts took place in most cases under the pretext of punishing sinful thoughts or unvirtuous conduct, and in isolated cases as a substitute for confession (in return for not having to confess impure phantasies). Other victims tell of the priest professing to bestow a blessing upon them through the applied sexual practices. In the case of one interviewee, for whom the sexual abuse began at the age of four, the priest attested year upon year that he had to perform the acts to drive the devil out of her. By embedding the sexual assaults in acts of exorcism, he not only lent his acts a necessity, but at the same time sparked deep feelings of shame and guilt in the purportedly possessed victim. In addition to this, acts of abuse were frequently made part of religious rituals. The sexual act was thus often followed by a form of shared repentance for the committed sin, for example by praying the rosary.

All such abuse strategies are characterised by the clerics exploiting the Catholic beliefs they inculcated in the victims in order to establish the abuse relationship. This religious manipulation amplifies the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness triggered in victims, and notably also the sense of legitimacy and normality, in some cases even necessity with regard to the acts committed by the clergy offender. Even decades after the abuse, the accounts of some interviewees still show retention of the justification strategies used by the cleric. This manifests in remarks such as “maybe I deserved it after all”. There is clearly self-accusation on the part of the victim here, by means of which he lends a sense of purpose to the sexual assaults. At the same time, the victim takes over the guilt from the offender, who is thus released from his responsibility for the sexual abuse. Along with a possible desire to uphold positive elements of the relationship with the offender, the religious belief patterns internalised by interviewees lead to a distorted perception of their victimhood and of the situation at the time. In this way, a legitimation of the sexual abuse committed by the cleric takes place.



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How being bound up in Catholic belief patterns makes it hard fully to renounce the mode of interpretation applied by the offender is illustrated by this extract from an interview with a male victim aged 66:

> "And, um, and in some way, I was, um, I wasn't at all aware what he wanted, «Have you sinned, have you masturbated, have you committed a sin?» And, um, well perhaps even in those days I did have a certain urge to sin."

As can be seen from the interviewee's accounts, the sexual assaults took place here under the guise of investigating sinful conduct. But though the victim today recognises this pretext for what it is, he takes on the justification pattern used by the offender almost verbatim. He thus ascribes himself an "urge to sin" and continues to speak of himself as a sinner. Through this, it is his conduct that is made to appear reproachable and not that of the priest. Furthermore the abuse becomes just punishment for his childhood transgression, and thus is legitimised in the interviewee's interpretation. The fact that he regards himself as a sinner to this day shows the lasting influence of his religious socialisation, including in relation to Catholic sexual morals: Masturbation appears to be a sin for him even today.

### *10.5.5 Religious interpretation of and coping with the experiences of sexual abuse*

A further reaction pattern shown in a number of the interviewed victims consists of a religious revaluation of what happened. In that they retrospectively give a purpose to the experiences of sexual abuse by recourse to religious beliefs, the emotional burden triggered by the abuse is reduced: Feelings of pain, anger and sadness are compensated by the purpose-giving interpretation. In this way, the religious convictions internalised in the course of a Catholic upbringing and socialisation serve within the interviewee's intrapsychic emotion and behaviour regulation processes as a strategy for coping with their traumatic experiences.

Two remarks by a victim now aged 41 provide a particularly striking illustration of this recourse to religious interpretation models for coping with sexual abuse:

> "And the difficulties that come in accepting as well as possible and, then, um, at all seeing the divine in every other person and at all seeing in all situations in life the divine and not accident but a divine teacher who wants to tell me something. And humility, um, is when, yes, when I get it in the neck, that I



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> then, um, accept it from God, simply because I have the devotion to see everything as being from God."

By the embedding of the abuse in a religious world view and the acceptance of a divine determinism, the traumatic experiences are here revaluated: In the avowal of "seeing the divine in every other person and at all seeing in all situations in life the divine and not accident but a divine teacher who wants to tell me something", the experiences are transformed into a divine test that gives the interviewee an opportunity to show himself to God as being worthy. The words "because I have the devotion to see everything as being from God" mark the interviewee's special gift of seeing the abuse as part of a divine plan intended for him. Because he humbly follows God's will, his obedience is rewarded with divine care, enabling him to draw something positive from the painful experiences. In precisely the same direction, he also explains later in the interview that despite the sexual abuse he was "given a great gift" because it also "helped me become the person I am today." This purpose-giving, positive revaluation enables the interviewee to compensate for feelings of helplessness, despair and pain invoked by the sexual abuse. All symptoms and stress reactions found in the victim even a long time after the experiences of victimisation are thus given a higher purpose and serve in his personality development.

In addition, in the course of this revaluation, the sexual assaults by the priest are given a legitimation: They no longer appear as the act of a responsible human being, but instead as part of a divine plan.

Based on the conviction that everything that happens in this life is God-given, all that happened as well as the right to judge over it is laid in God's hands. For this reason, bringing criminal charges against the priest would not have come into question for the interviewee; instead, in his interpretation, God will give him his righteous judgement:

> "It isn't up to me to make judgement here, that, um, that is for the Lord to do, maybe after death. Then he [the offender – SF] will surely reap the consequences."

These remarks provide an example of how the fulfillment of expectations is projected into a transcendental sphere by drawing upon religious beliefs – the same process outlined from a sociology of religion perspective at the beginning of this paper. Compensation for the experienced suffering and pain thus takes place through belief in divine punishment for the offender after death. Feelings of anger and aggressive impulses are also alleviated at the same time.



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## 10.6. Summary and discussion

In the interviewed victims' upbringing and socialisation, their conduct and world view were made to be closely linked with religious classification systems and models. Both in everyday family life and through strong involvement in the life of the community, Catholic beliefs and rituals gain special significance at perceptual, cognitive and interactive level: They shape the interviewees' experience, interpretation and practical everyday conduct. This early childhood influence of the Church as a socialisation institution that also projects into the family is so enduring that it can be seen in most recounted reaction patterns to sexual abuse to this day. Many interviewees thus attempt to interpret and cope with their traumatic experiences using their internalised religious patterns of interpretation. An interesting aspect is that their Catholic faith serves them as a coping strategy: To cope with the traumatic experiences they draw upon cognitive means made available by the Church – and this despite the fact that the sexual abuse took place in the institutional context of the Church and frequently under the guise of Catholic beliefs, as became evident most of all in the religious neutralisation strategies applied by the clerics. Those offender strategies, which find expression in the exploitation of religious beliefs as an explanation and justification of the sexual assaults, represent a feature specific to the phenomenon of sexual abuse within the Church.

As the interviewees' subjective reception, interpretation and coping with experiences of abuse is shaped by their religious socialisation, it is possible to identify specific reaction patterns and coping strategies in this research field. As has been seen, the frequently encountered recourse to religious interpretation schemes has an ambivalent impact on the coping with the experienced sexual assaults: On the one hand, the interviewees' Catholic faith can tend to be helpful and facilitate interpretation and coping processes. The last-cited interview sequences in particular illustrate how religious convictions can serve within intrapsychic emotion regulation processes as a coping resource for traumatic experiences. Retrospectively assigning the sexual abuse a purpose and sacred significance alleviates feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, pain and hurt. Projection of expectations into a transcendental sphere (for example the expectation of just punishment for the offender) reduces feelings of injustice and anger. For some victims, on the other hand, their Catholic faith proves more of a handicap and hinders processes of interpretation and coping. In this connection, it was evident mainly that for some victims, it was their



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strong emotional affiliation and loyalty to the local Church community that impeded any coping with sexual abuse in the course of disclosure and seeking help in the Church milieu. Additionally, one interview sequence showed by way of example how being bound up in Catholic belief patterns can lead to adoption of the neutralisation strategies used by the cleric and thus make it hard fully to renounce the mode of interpretation applied by the offender.

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