

# The U.S. Church should pay attention to the French report on sex abuse. Here's why

By now we have been depressed once more by headlines of abuse in the Catholic Church, this time in France, where the large number of cases (more than 200,000) blazoned across our newsfeeds. Pope Francis recently called the abuse in France a "[moment of shame](#)."

But beyond that stomach-churning number, there are [details in the report](#) that merit wider consideration. Perhaps even more urgently, all Catholics should examine the 45 highly detailed recommendations made by the Sauvé Commission. These are contained in the 50-page report. Below, I translate the recommendations that stand out as especially important for wider consideration by Catholics outside of francophone contexts.

I pass over in silence recommendations that are sufficiently commonplace today – for example, criminal background checks). Additionally, I do not treat the typically “bureaucratic” recommendations that call for finessing canonical procedures, greater transparency in reporting data and greater coordination between officials in France. Finally, I have opted for common English usage in using the phrase “sexual abuse,” but it bears pointing out that the French original almost always (90+ times) speaks of “*les violences sexuelles*,” which reminds us of the incredibly destructive damage and trauma left by these sins that the American psychiatrist Leonard Shengold rightly called “soul murder.”

## **Avoiding manipulation, domination and abuses of power**

Beginning at the third recommendation, we find a call for “identifying all forms of the abuse of power.” In several places, the report recognizes that we are not just dealing with abuses of sex, or physical abuse, but also abuse of power in spiritual form. We saw this in France last year with Jean Vanier, [whom I wrote about for OSV](#). He often used “spiritual direction” as the arena for his violations of women.

Even more strikingly, this recommendation issues a surprisingly strong emphasis (for a report that was not written by churchmen) on returning again and again to renewed understanding that “the Gospels” require the Church to be structured and governed in a way free of “domination” and “manipulation.”

This theme reappears in the seventh recommendation, which calls for all Catholics to understand that the Gospels absolutely forbid anyone from trying to achieve “power over another.”

## **Avoiding pseudo-heroism and domination in clergy**

The fourth recommendation builds on this, calling for a new awareness by and of clergy that their role is never one of pseudo-heroism or domination (“*une position héroïque ou de domination*”). Under this recommendation, they also suggest – but with admirable restraint – that the Church consider ordaining married men to the priesthood. (This is actually a rather complicated recommendation, which I subject to some critical analysis in my new book, “Married Priests in the Catholic Church,” published in April by the University of Notre Dame Press.)

## **Requiring additional episcopal oversight**

The fifth recommendation may be necessary, but it will certainly not be easy, and it takes us back to some very longstanding conflicts in Church history that are often referred to as the fight between the “charismatic” and the “institutional” sides of the Church, or the “monastic” and “episcopal.” The recommendation calls for “an effective control by the Catholic hierarchy of all religious communities.”

In a report where there is much good sense, this seems a bewildering suggestion that cross-purposes with the rest of a report that repeatedly recognizes how fatally compromised bishops are when it comes to exercising authority and cleaning up abuses in their own jurisdictions. Who in their right mind would trust them with any more responsibility? And which bishop, in his right mind, would want more work of this sort?

## **Critically discerning authority and obedience**

The sixth and seventh recommendations focus on religious communities, insisting their constitutions must be scrutinized for language and practices leading to dangerous “demands for obedience and silence.”

This will show up again in recommendation No. 44, which addresses itself to seminarians and novices in religious houses, insisting that they must learn to “develop a critical spirit and the capacities for reflection and elaboration” on the “questions of authority and obedience.”

The best writer on such problems is a contemporary Spanish Jesuit priest, Father Carlos Dominguez Morano, in his 2018 book “Belief After Freud.” He rightly draws our attention to how little the New Testament says of obedience compared to the other evangelical counsels of poverty and chastity. The

Scriptures are very straightforward in their advocacy of chastity and poverty. Obedience, by contrast, is a very ambivalent thing – sometimes recommended, but very often rejected, as when, for example, Jesus attacks unquestioning obedience to rules such as keeping the Sabbath.

## **Annual liturgical commemorations**

The 26th recommendation echoes something I have written about before: the necessity of the Church inaugurating new liturgical and para-liturgical ways of confessing her sins and moving toward repentance and reconciliation. Such services must be developed “in concert with victimized persons” and such services must be “public liturgical ceremonies” whose goal is “remembering the suffering of victims” and, even after death, memorial services “for victims and their suffering.”

## **Restorative justice**

The next recommendation, No. 27, is one I first saw attempted in my native Canada 30 years ago when the Anglican Church there was attempting to respond to abuse of children in its residential schools. This recommendation says that while the usual penal processes (canonical trials, much treated in many later recommendations) should unfold, there should also, at the same time, be put in place a process of “restorative justice.” Too often, questions of justice, much less of restoration, are totally ignored by lawyers playing hardball for the Church, trying to get victims to sign nondisclosure agreements in exchange for some paltry compensation and bringing the proceedings to a close as quickly as possible – and as far from the public spotlight as possible. In France and elsewhere, let us hope those days are over.

## **Independent commission for compensation**

On the question of compensation, recommendation No. 32 calls for this to be taken out of the hands of the Church and its

lawyers and given to a newly constituted and independent external agency to figure out.

## **Breaking up monopolies of power**

Recommendation 34 calls for strict “scrutinizing” of any office in the Church where we find “the concentration in the hands of one person the powers of order and government.” This recommendation further insists that the Church differentiate or “de-identify” “sacramental ability” (“*la puissance sacramentelle*”) from “power” (“*pouvoir*”) in the strict sense. (To put this concretely in the words of a beloved Ukrainian Catholic priest friend of mine that he used in a new parish when meeting with the people for the first time, “You don’t tell me how to say the liturgy, and I don’t tell you how to make pierogies or which color to paint the parish hall”!)

## **The laics in the councils of the Church**

The final recommendation worth deeper consideration is No.36. The commission says that because of the “principle of equal dignity,” the Church must “reinforce” or “greatly strengthen” the “presence of the laics in general and of women in particular in the decision-making spheres of the Church.” (This is what I recommended in “Everything Hidden Shall Be Revealed: Ridding the Church of Abuses of Sex and Power,” published in 2019 by Angelico Press.)

The term “laics” here is not unique to French: It has a long pedigree in Greek and Latin, then in Russian and more recently in English thanks to the very influential theologian Nicholas Afanasiev, whom the fathers of Vatican II so highly esteemed. Use of this word is crucial for the anglophone Church to begin to overcome a clericalist mindset that interprets the word “laity” in a negative sense – that is, as people who have neither training nor authority and are therefore cut out of decision-making in the Church. By contrast, laics are baptized into the priesthood of Jesus Christ and “ordained” at their

chrismation/confirmation and thus constitute an “order” alongside clerics and hierarchs when it comes to parish councils and diocesan synods in the Church.

In sum, none of these recommendations will make the situation better immediately; none are a panacea in any context; all will require constant effort over the long haul. But we must act in order to purify the Church in every country so that eventually, to use Origen of Alexandria’s phrase, we may see in her “nothing unworthy of God’s majesty.”

*Adam A.J. DeVille is author of [“Everything Hidden Shall Be Revealed: Ridding the Church of Abuses of Sex and Power”](#) (Angelico Press, \$16.95). He writes from Indiana.*