

## Myths About Child Sexual Abuse - Part 3

According to the dictionary, a myth is “a popular belief or story that has become associated with a person, institution, or occurrence; a traditional story accepted as history that serves to explain the world view of a people.”

In Parts 1 and 2 of this series, we addressed myths about *child* sexual abuse. As we have seen, the myths, or popular beliefs, about child sexual abuse, hinder our ability to prevent child abuse. Myths about other kinds of abuse also get in the way of our desire to eliminate violence from all relationships. By operating as if myths are *true*, we are limited in our ability to see the scope of the potential risks to those around us. This also allows those who exhibit such behavior to operate freely—without scrutiny. In other words, our reliance on myths as *truth* allows abusers to get away with the abuse!

One specific area where myths obstruct our view of *what's really happening* and skew our interpretation of *who is the “real” victim* is in the area of sexual abuse of adult women by clergy, other professionals, and domestic partners. Society often cites myths as “truth” in order to avoid the challenge of dealing with the damage that results from the victimization of this population.

Among the most popular myths associated with abuse of adult women by clergy, other professionals, and domestic partners are the following:

- **MYTH: Priests are Christ on earth and can do no wrong.**

This attitude permeates the thought process of many Catholics. Catholics learn at an early age to respect priests, and that priests *know* what is morally right and morally wrong. Cultivation of these points of view allows a priest to have control or power over people—control that might normally be denied to others outside the family. This myth does immeasurable damage.

- **MYTH: The “woman should have stopped the priest” before it went too far.**

In a relationship between a woman and her priest or deacon, there is an imbalance of power. The role of a cleric carries with it certain expectations, authority, power, and expertise. A priest or deacon can easily misuse the power with people who come to him for assistance. Vulnerability is the result of one person having less power or authority in the relationship than another person. Congregants and staff have less power in the Church than the clergy they work for; so, it is the responsibility of the cleric, not the woman, to maintain the professional relationship.

- **MYTH: Women who are victims of domestic or clergy abuse can simply “leave the situation.”**

Asking why women don't leave a situation also shifts the blame from the abuser to the victim. It blames the victim for being abused. Abusers attack women's bodies and minds either to prevent them from leaving, punish them for leaving, or force them to come back. In fact, statistics show that women who are victims of abuse at the hands of their husbands or boyfriends DO leave. However, they frequently flee into poverty and repeatedly tell family, friends, and law enforcement that their lives are in danger. Women, who leave an abusive relationship with a priest, deacon, or therapist, often end up in another abusive relationship.

In addition, abusive clergy use God to keep the victim from taking action. An abusive cleric may tell the victim that God approves of the relationship. Clergy perpetrators may convince the victim that God approves of the sexual relationship with the priest or that the relationship is “special” in God's eyes. At other times, the priest or deacon may threaten that the wrath of God will descend if the clergy's demands/needs are refused.

In addition, the manipulation, deceit, and bribery that frequently accompany the abuse may leave the victim with a sense of being a willing participant in the acts. People who are sexually abused by clergy often believe this myth and they harbor a great deal of guilt. They think it was *their fault* and that *they were a willing participant*.

- **MYTH: If the woman consents to having sex with a priest, physician, or therapist, it is not sexual misconduct or abuse.**

The relationships between helping professionals and the adult women they serve increase the risk of abuse or misuse of power. Priests, physicians, therapists, and other helping professionals are in a position of power in the relationship, and the woman is vulnerable. Helping professionals have ability, credentials, knowledge, and status. Women seeking such help are frequently *needy* and often have little in the way of a support system.

The helping professional is expected to promote the best interests of the person seeking assistance. It is a violation of ethical, moral, and fiduciary responsibilities for a priest, physician, or therapist to have a sexual relationship with a congregant, staff member, student, or patient.

- **MYTH: Women [who are victims of domestic violence] bring the beatings on themselves.**

Once again this statement blames the victim for the abuse. The fact is that a batterer does not just “lose his temper.” He is not just suffering from stress, or reacting to provocation by the woman. In fact, many experts say that a violent man is not out of control. Instead, he is a master of control—training *his* woman to be just what he wants her to be, and only what he wants her to be. The batterer’s actions seem to be directed toward “the creation of a willing victim.”

- **MYTH: Alcohol abuse causes most domestic violence.**

Because batterers are often agreeable, nice, even conciliatory in their relationships with bosses, neighbors, friends, and police officers, many people look for some “reason” that triggers the abuse. They often look for some explanation such as abuse of alcohol. However, researchers find that how a man deals with stress, conflicts, feelings, alcohol use, or upsetting circumstances often depends on the gender and status of the other person. The abuser uses appropriate interpersonal skills with other people in his life because it suits his purposes. Abusive husbands and boyfriends are skilled at using control and coercion techniques that resemble the torture methods employed by terrorists and the techniques used to brainwash prisoners and concentration camp survivors. The issue is control—not alcohol, stress, conflicts, or any other reason offered to excuse the behavior of batterers.

## **CONCLUSION:**

A myth is a popular belief or story that has become associated with a person, institution, or occurrence—a story told so convincingly and so often that it becomes accepted as “the truth.” In our search for solutions to complex social problems, such as sexual abuse, we are often tempted into believing simple myths that seemingly provide a shortcut to preventing certain behaviors. When we believe such myths, we become part of the problem rather than the solution. We contribute to the grooming process of offenders and we reinforce the negative feelings experienced by victims.

Dispelling myths means taking time to learn to recognize the myths and to educate ourselves about the facts. It means keeping an open mind and always being willing to hear another opinion or a different point of view. It means being receptive to new information and remembering that there are no simple answers to the questions about the abuse of children and vulnerable adults.

By dispelling myths, we eliminate stereotypes and unnecessary fears, and create an opportunity for community members to work together addressing problems such as sexual abuse.

*Brought to you through the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. and its VIRTUS® programs with the goal to help prevent, address, and mitigate wrongdoing in the community of faith and to help adults become protectors of children and to help communities become safe havens for children.*