

Power Literacy in Abuse Prevention Education: Lessons from the Field in the Catholic Safeguarding Response

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Abstract: The phenomenon of sexual abuse by Catholic leaders has led to many responses by clergy, dioceses, and the global Catholic Church. One underexplored aspect of preventing sexual abuse by Catholic leaders is the educational practice of abuse prevention and the moral implications therein. Here we examine best practices for abuse prevention by turning to the interdisciplinary study of intimate partner violence and prevention education as tools for deeper theological exploration of safeguarding initiatives. Using these interdisciplinary insights, we offer theological grounding for power and relationship education in abuse prevention, identifying children’s moral agency, right relationship, a theology of power literacy, and structures of vice as key components in the phenomenon of pervasive abuse. We explain the analysis of safeguarding materials conducted as part of Fordham University’s Taking Responsibility grant initiative, and our concerns regarding the lack of best practices and theological gaps noted in our review—gaps related to social ethics, power, and the structural or communal effects of abuse. We conclude with recommendations for developing future safeguarding training, rooted in a relationship-based, systemic understanding of abuse, used to create our own safeguarding workshop for adolescents.

Sexual abuse by Catholic leaders has left enduring wounds not only on those who have experienced it but also the larger Catholic Church.¹ An essential part of addressing these wounds and preventing further wounding has been the development of safeguarding materials, as mandated by the 2002

¹ Clergy are not the only perpetrators of sexual abuse; there is evidence of abuse by religious and lay leaders. Hence, we refer to the problem as sexual abuse by Catholic leaders. For example, see this list of people with credible allegations from the Massachusetts Diocese of Springfield, “Finding of Credibility of an Allegation of Sexual Abuse of a Minor,” 2023, diospringfield.org/oseva-credible-allegation-abuse-minor/. Two Catholic school teachers and one other lay employee are listed.

Dallas Charter from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).² Safeguarding, also known as sexual violence prevention education, is one of the five recommendations made in Karen Terry et al.'s *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950–2010* to help protect potential victims. Additionally, educating youth and community members to recognize signs of grooming and abuse has been shown to increase the likelihood of reporting perpetration.³ Based on the importance of sexual violence prevention education in addressing and preventing abuse by Catholic leaders, it is necessary that educators continue evaluating curricula based on the most recent research on abuse, interpreted through a theological lens.

This article offers theo-ethical grounding for the need to include power and relationship education in abuse prevention. Specifically, theological understandings of agency, power, relationships, and structures of virtue and vice can contribute to a more holistic framework for evaluating and creating safeguarding materials in the US Catholic Church. As several social science studies have shown, an interdisciplinary approach to sexual abuse prevention is essential.⁴ Thus, this article draws collaboratively from the fields of theology, psychology, sexuality studies, and intimate partner violence studies to further the conversation on how best to safeguard minors.

In this article, we examine best practices for abuse prevention by turning to the interdisciplinary study of intimate partner violence and prevention education as tools for deeper theological exploration of safeguarding initiatives. Using these interdisciplinary insights, we

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Promise to Protect, Pledge to Heal: Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2018), article 12, referring to “safe environment programs.”

³ Karen J. Terry, Margaret Leland Smith, Katarina Schuth, James R. Kelly, Brenda Vollman, and Christina Massey, *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950–2010* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2011), 120–121, www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/The-Causes-and-Context-of-Sexual-Abuse-of-Minors-by-Catholic-Priests-in-the-United-States-1950-2010.pdf.

⁴ See, for example, Anthony Kosnik, William Carroll, Agnes Cunningham, Ronald Modras, and James Schulte, *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (New York: Paulist, 1977), 241: “To our colleagues in the theological and other sciences—we invite your serious criticism and encourage continuation of scholarly dialogue on the topic of human sexuality. We hope that our study will provide a stimulus for the kind of theological discussion that will contribute to a better understanding and more effective articulation of the Christian values we share in common.” See also Susan A. Nancarrow, Andrew Booth, Steven Ariss, Tony Smith, Pam Enderby, and Alison Roots, “Ten Principles of Good Interdisciplinary Team Work,” *Human Resources for Health* 11, no. 19 (2013): 1–11, especially 2–3 on why interdisciplinary work is important in healthcare, which suggests the same for sexual abuse prevention, another healthcare concern.

offer theological grounding for power and relationship education in abuse prevention, identifying children's moral agency, right relationships, a theology of power literacy, and structures of vice as key components in the phenomenon of pervasive abuse. Next, we present the analysis of safeguarding materials we conducted as part of Fordham University's *Taking Responsibility* grant initiative, and our concerns regarding the lack of best practices and theological gaps we noted in our review—gaps related to social ethics, power, and the structural or communal effects of abuse.⁵ We conclude with recommendations for developing safeguarding training rooted in a relationship-based, systemic understanding of abuse, used to create our own safeguarding workshop for adolescents, which took place in 2022.

EXAMINING BEST PRACTICES: ABUSE AND GENDER VIOLENCE

Interdisciplinary research on intimate relationships, particularly regarding gender dynamics and power imbalances, can help construct best practices for abuse prevention education grounded in theological concepts. Relationship abuse looks different across time and culture. In recent US history, relationship abuse has been referred to as domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV).⁶ Unfortunately, partner abuse has throughout history found protection in biblical interpretations (e.g., Eph 5:22, 5:24) in relation to a wife's obedience to a husband. Notably, the Catholic Church's role in endorsing domestic abuse evidenced in the 15th century text "The Rules of Marriage"⁷ has made it a focal point in many chronicles of the history of domestic violence.⁸ In 2002, the USCCB released a statement titled

⁵ We are tremendously grateful for the funding received through the *Taking Responsibility* grant from Fordham University. The grant not only offered us financial resources to pursue this work, it also knit us into a community of researchers seeking to put an end to this scourge. More information about this grant can be found at takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu/marquette-youth-track/.

⁶ Du Nguyen and Amy E. Naugle, "Intimate Partner Sexual Violence and Gender Asymmetry," in *Handbook of Sexual Assault and Sexual Assault Prevention*, ed. William O'Donohue and Paul Schewe (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 801. The authors describe IPV as often used synonymously with domestic violence, though domestic violence may also refer to abuse more broadly within the family structure.

⁷ Also translated as the "Rules of Married Life." See Cherubino da Siena, OFM, *Regole della vita matrimoniale*, ed. Francesco Zambrini and Carlo Negroni (Bologna: Romagnoli, 1888), archive.org/details/regoledellavitam00cheruoft. First published as Cherubino da Siena, OFM, *Regola della vita spirituale. Add: Regola della vita matrimoniale* (Florence: Nicolò di Lorenzo, 1477), archive.org/details/ita-bnc-in2-00000997-001.

⁸ See for example Terry Davidson, *Conjugal Crime: Understanding and Changing the Wifebeating Pattern* (New York: Hawthorn, 1978), 99; Karin L. Swisher and Carol Wekesser, eds., *Violence against Women* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven, 1994), 20; Arthur S. Flemming, Mary F. Berry, Stephen Horn, Blandina Cardenas Ramirez, Jill S. Ruckelshaus, and Murray Saltzman, *Under the Rule of Thumb: Battered Women*

When I Call for Help,⁹ denouncing the practice of domestic abuse—an updated version of a 1992 statement. Domestic violence has also been condemned by recent popes addressing the mutuality of relationship and denouncing the practice of partner abuse (e.g., *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 69; *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 10). Accompanying pastoral resources for IPV prevention have also been created in recent years.¹⁰ These resources often refer to heterosexual partnerships in which a man is physically abusing a woman.¹¹ We utilize the broader term “intimate partner violence” because the field of domestic violence has since recognized the harms that can come from the gendered assumption that men are always the abusers and more specifically from myths such as “men cannot be abused,” “in a relationship involving two women, no one is an aggressor/abuser,” and “two men cannot abuse each other in a romantic relationship.”¹² While abuse/aggression is often linked to messages of masculinity,¹³ it is true

and the Administration of Justice, United States Commission on Civil Rights (1982), www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/confrontingviolence/assets/transcripts/OB12012_200_dpi.pdf.

⁹ USCCB, “When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence against Women,” 2002, www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/when-i-call-for-help.cfm.

¹⁰ See, for example: Catholics for Family Peace, “Healthy Relationships,” n.d., www.catholicsforfamilypeace.org/healthy-relationships.html; John J. Enzler, Mike Mellone, John Dillon, Kevin Thompson, Joseph Calis, Jim Boccabella, and Rob Maro, *Listen with Love: A Guide for Parishes on Domestic Violence Outreach*, Catholic Charities DC (catholiccharitiesdc.org, 2018), www.catholiccharitiesdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Domestic-Violence-Pastoral-Resource-Packet-Complete-Final-7-3-18.pdf; Christauria Welland, *How Can We Help to End Violence in Catholic Families? A Guide for Clergy, Religious, and Laity* (paxinfamilia.org, 2015), paxinfamilia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/How-to-end-violence-in-Catholic-families-N-America-etc.pdf.

¹¹ USCCB, “Domestic Violence,” 2022, www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/domestic-violence. The page begins with a quote from the document “Violence against Women . . . Is Never Justified” noting that the resources on the page “address abused women, men who abuse, and pastors and pastoral staff.”

¹² Benjamin Hine, Elizabeth A. Bates, and Sarah Wallace, “I Have Guys Call Me and Say ‘I Can’t Be the Victim of Domestic Abuse’: Exploring the Experiences of Telephone Support Providers for Male Victims of Domestic Violence and Abuse,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, nos. 7–8 (2022): NP5595.

¹³ David Lisak, Jim Hopper, and Pat Song, “Factors in the Cycle of Violence: Gender Rigidity and Emotional Constriction,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9, no. 4 (1996): 721–743, doi.org/10.1007/BF02104099; Rachel M. Smith, Dominic J. Parrott, Kevin M. Swartout, and Andra T. Tharp, “Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity: The Roles of Antifemininity, Subordination to Women, and Sexual Dominance in Men’s Perpetration of Sexual Aggression,” *Psychology of Men and Masculinities* 16, no. 2 (2015): 160–169, doi:10.1037/a0035956.

that people of any gender can inflict abuse or be abused in an intimate relationship.¹⁴

Intimate partner abuse is firmly rooted in an imbalance of power.¹⁵ Psychologists have asserted the same about sexual abuse by Catholic leaders.¹⁶ Helping young people understand power dynamics in relationships is one aspect of relationship education that has shown promise in abuse prevention.¹⁷ While materials to prevent child sexual abuse exist as required by the Dallas Charter since 2002, they often do not include education on recognizing power in abuse dynamics. Early intervention and being able to recognize abusive behaviors are considered best practices in preventing IPV, which suggests a similar correlation for sexual abuse of children.¹⁸

Even though *When I Call for Help* does acknowledge the role sexism and male power play in domestic violence, feminist ethicists have noted that the theology of gender complementarity (the belief that women and men are created by God with distinct essences and gifts made to complement and explain each other) has contributed to a culture of gender-based violence by promoting male activity and leadership and female passivity and receptivity.¹⁹ This phenomenon is

¹⁴ National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Intimate Partner Violence in 2015* (2016), 24, avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2015_ncavp_lgbtqipvreport.pdf.

¹⁵ Kiara Minto, Barbara M. Masser, and Winnifred R. Louis, "Identifying Nonphysical Intimate Partner Violence in Relationships: The Role of Beliefs and Schemas," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, nos. 5/6 (2022): 2425. In this study, power imbalances and control were related to all forms of IPV.

¹⁶ See, for example, Stephen J. Rossetti and the Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute, *A Tragic Grace: The Catholic Church and Child Sexual Abuse* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996); Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007); Nina Spröber, Thekla Schneider, Miriam Rassenhofer, Alexander Seitz, Hubert Liebhardt, Lilith König, and Jörg M. Fegert, "Child Sexual Abuse in Religiously Affiliated and Secular Institutions: A Retrospective Descriptive Analysis of Data Provided by Victims in a Government-Sponsored Reappraisal Program in Germany," *BMC Public Health* 14, no. 282 (2014): 2; Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123.

¹⁷ Nicole A. Haberland, "The Case for Addressing Gender and Power in Sexuality and HIV Education: A Comprehensive Review of Evaluation Studies," *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 41, no. 1 (2015): 35–37.

¹⁸ Phyllis Holditch Nolon, Megan Kearns, Jenny Dills, Kirsten Rambo, Sharon Irving, Theresa L. Armstead, and Leah Gilbert, *Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices*, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta, 2017), 12, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-technicalpackages.pdf. See also Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Intimate Partner Violence: Prevention Strategies," 2021, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/prevention.html.

¹⁹ See Ross, "Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis"; Elisabeth T. Vasko, "The Difference Gender Makes: Nuptiality, Analogy, and the Limits of

also supported by empirical research, when examined as the rigid endorsement of gender roles.²⁰ Additionally, the gendered division of reason and emotion can contribute to an unhealthy socialization of boys and men who become unable to express their emotions in healthy ways, which may lead to violence.²¹ Theologian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points to the “kyriarchal politics of submission” within Christianity as justifying submission to male authority and the self-sacrifice of victims in the name of God’s will.²² Church leaders who do not acknowledge the role of essentialist gender scripts in intimate partner violence may be continuing to promote relationships that view unjust suffering and submission as a Christian virtue, and power and control as a natural byproduct of male authority in the family. These scripts have the potential to contribute to a structure of patriarchy wherein power is abused in the name of the church. In a structure that demands submission of some to the authority of another, sexual contact cannot be consensual because it is infused with power.²³

In sum, best practices include recognizing the problematic history of church silence (and at times, complicity) on the matter of intimate partner violence and recognizing that violence can be perpetrated by people of all genders in a relationship. This empowers those being abused to speak up by creating an atmosphere that makes room for their experience. Best practices also include naming ways in which gendered assumptions of masculinity can contribute to unhealthy relationships with one’s emotions that may socialize people into a culture of abuse and violence when these assumptions go unexamined.

Appropriating Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology in the Context of Sexual Violence,” *Journal of Religion* 94, no. 4 (2014): 504–528, doi.org/10.1086/677290; Lisa Isherwood, “Marriage: Haven or Hell? Twin Souls and Broken Bones,” *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 203–215.

²⁰ See Lisak, Hopper, and Song, “Factors in the Cycle of Violence,” 721: “Both sexually and physically abused men who perpetrated manifested significantly more gender rigidity and emotional constriction than abused nonperpetrators.” See also O. Gilbar, S. R. Wester, and A. Ben-Porat, “The Effects of Gender Role Conflict Restricted Emotionality on the Association between Exposure to Trauma, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and Intimate Partner Violence Severity,” *Psychology of Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 1 (2021): 88: “Socialization to traditional norms may cause men distress—the experience of which does not align with male social standards—potentially leading to further gender role conflict, specifically restricted emotionality (GRC-RE), which in turn promotes IPV.”

²¹ See, for example, Gilbar, Wester, and Ben-Porat, “Gender Role Conflict Restricted Emotionality,” 97.

²² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction,” in *Concilium: Violence Against Women*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (London: SCM, 1994), xv, xviii.

²³ Karen Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Christian Account* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 45.

THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING OF POWER AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION FOR ABUSE PREVENTION

Given these best practices in gender dynamics and power literacy education, let us turn to the theological foundations of power and relationships in a Catholic setting. Power imbalances do not only exist in regard to intimate partnership violence and unequal gender dynamics but also in the priesthood. While the abuse of power in the priesthood is often connected with clericalism, the complexity of power dynamics in abusive relationships extends beyond the clergy-laity relationship.²⁴ As discussed above, feminist theologians and ethicists have critically examined the way gender dynamics are constructed and promoted in the Catholic tradition, and the ways theologies of gender essentialism and complementarity have contributed to a culture of sexual abuse. In this section, moving towards a more grounded approach to safeguarding, we will explore the theological grounding of power and relationship education by drawing from Catholic theological scholarship on structures of vice, moral agency of children, ethical behavior in human relationships, and power literacy.

Evaluating Structures for Better Safeguarding Training

Theologian Daniel Daly's work on structures of vice and virtue can deepen the understanding of the abuse crisis and offer a way to address it through educating adolescents on healthy and unhealthy use of power in relationships. The reality of structures of sin can be hard to accept. Recent popes have referred to social structures of sin, especially economic ones, rather than individual sinful actions.²⁵ The concept of sin and its impact beyond the individual is present in magisterial documents of Vatican II,²⁶ as well as encyclicals from

²⁴ Thomas Plante, "Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Roman Catholic Church: Dispelling Eleven Myths and Separating Facts from Fiction," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 7, no. 4 (2020): 224. One of the myths Plante dispels is that clericalism is a cause of the sexual abuse crisis.

²⁵ For a history of the development of the concept of structural sin, see Daniel Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1039 (2011): 341–357, doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01355.x. See also Daniel Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 34–44. Daly identifies Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* as the first papal encyclical referencing the concept of structures of sin. More recently, the *Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano's* final document from the Medellín conference (1968) addresses the "situación de pecado" or situation of sin ("La Paz," no. 1), in which Daly accurately reads the relevance of structures interfering with peace. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), *passim*, which further develops the relationship between poverty, the poor, and social structures.

²⁶ Daly and Marciano Vidal both interpret *Lumen Gentium's* reference to "the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being

Pope John Paul II,²⁷ Pope Benedict XVI,²⁸ and Pope Francis.²⁹ Ecclesiologist Richard Lennan acknowledges that turning a critical eye toward a church seen as exempt from conversion can be hard.³⁰ Yet refusing to look at structures within the church risks impeding safeguarding and prevention. This evaluation first requires an understanding of what structures are and how they work, and then some examples of structures theologians are already seeing within this church.

Moral theologians whose work focuses on structures offer an understanding of how structural sin works and how it might be changed. As Conor Kelly notes, the tensions in understanding structures of sin revolve around the role of personal sin and the agency of structures.³¹ Kelly defines structural sin (a term he uses interchangeably with structures of sin) as “an institution or collective practice that either socially idealizes or economically incentivizes actions seeking exclusive self-interest(s) at the expense of the common good.”³² Structural sin can be recognized when a group assigns social or economic benefits to the few rather than all, which promotes injustice.

purified” (no. 8) as referring to sin beyond personal. Vidal concludes that this points to a new category of sin, which Daly further develops in his work. See Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” 343 and Marciano Vidal, “Structural Sin: A New Category in Moral Theology?,” in *History and Conscience: Studies in Honour of Father Sean O’Riordan, CSsR*, ed. Raphael Gallagher and Brendan McConvery (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1989), 183. Daly also agrees with Margaret Pfeil that *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 25) and *Lumen Gentium* (no. 36) also reference structures of sin and that this latter notion is further developed by Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* as well as Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate*. See Margaret Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin,” *Louvain Studies* 27, no. 2 (2002): 132–152.

²⁷ Pope John Paul II explicitly uses the term “structures of sin” in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), no. 39 and again in no. 59 (referring to abortion). He also references the social nature of sin in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 31. See also Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin,” 139–145.

²⁸ Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” 342. Daly reads *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 36 as referencing economic structures (“Structures,” 351). Kelly also reads *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 34 as connecting original sin with societal structures. See Conor M. Kelly, “The Nature and Operation of Structural Sin: Additional Insights from Theology and Moral Psychology,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 298.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 66.

³⁰ Richard Lennan, “Ecclesiology and the Challenge of Ecclesial Failure,” in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, ed. Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023): 290–291.

³¹ Kelly, “Nature and Operation of Structural Sin,” 293.

³² Kelly, “Nature and Operation of Structural Sin,” 301.

Daly further develops the concept of structures of sin by focusing first on what structures are and how they work. He defines structures as “webs of social relations.”³³ Structures are more than the relations themselves or one’s position in the relation (Daly does not reduce the human person to positions occupied).³⁴ They are something new and different from the original relations, and they influence whatever falls within them, from institutions to practices to narratives and paradigms.³⁵ As a new reality, structures can be evaluated. Daly calls “structures of virtue” structures consistently oriented toward justice and “structures of vice” those consistently oriented toward injustice. Discerning if a structure is vicious or virtuous requires considering how well the structure supports all people within the structure, not just a few. Daly’s nuanced analysis of structures of vice complements Kelly’s talk of “structures of sin,” where structures restrict freedom and agency and are also oriented toward injustice.

This discussion of structures of virtue and vice is relevant to the situation of sexual abuse by Catholic leaders and explains the shuffling of abusive priests from parish to parish rather than removing their faculties for ministry, causing scandal. The network of relations between priests, deacons, bishops, religious, teachers, catechists, or other Catholic leaders whose positional power is unequal to others such as lay people has contributed to defining a structure. This structure is not virtuous; it has created a situation where abuse was perpetuated. For the promotion of human flourishing for all, this and any other structures contributing to abuse are in need of conversion from vice to virtue.

Observing the structures present within the Catholic Church that have contributed to sexual abuse by Catholic leaders is a necessary step in evaluating whether they are virtuous or vicious. Two structures have already been implicated in the crisis: structural clericalism and hierarchicalism. A recent study by Julie Rubio and Paul Schutz considers the role of structural clericalism in clergy sexual abuse.³⁶

³³ Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*, 75.

³⁴ Daly, *Structures of Virtue*, 77.

³⁵ Daniel J. Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” 354. His source is Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Instruction of Christian Freedom and Liberation” (1986), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html.

³⁶ We realize that clericalism is a sensitive term. Plante, for example, defines clericalism as offering special and privileged benefits to a small group of people allowed to make most or all decisions for the group and having special status that is not questioned. See Plante, “Clergy Sexual Abuse,” 224. Plante denies that clericalism is a cause of sexual abuse by clergy (although he acknowledges that it does exist among bishops and priests). At the same time, Pope Francis, in his “Letter to the People of God” (2018), no. 2, connects clericalism and abuse, which prevents conversion of the church. In light of Pope Francis’s words, we use Rubio and Schutz’s term of “structural clericalism.”

They define clericalism as “a structure of power that isolates clergy and sets priests above and apart, granting them excessive authority, trust, rights, and responsibilities while diminishing the agency of lay people and religious.”³⁷ They implicate unjust articulations of sex, gender, and power in this structure, but retain hope that the structure can change.³⁸ Structural clericalism is one structure within the complex problem of sexual abuse by Catholic leaders, one in which the vulnerable people are not only children, but also adult laity and religious (their sample included only adults). Because people have been sexually abused, this is a structure of vice. This understanding of structural clericalism also demonstrates what needs to be changed to elicit conversion of the structure.

Structural clericalism is not the only structure at work in this crisis. Moral theologian James Keenan asserts that hierarchicalism is also problematic.³⁹ Hierarchicalism differs from clericalism because it implicates the episcopacy in creating a culture of coverup amongst themselves.⁴⁰ Bishops protected each other in the name of the church, losing sight of those who had been abused, and refusing accountability outside their own ranks. Keenan’s answer to hierarchicalism is increased episcopal vulnerability. Keenan retains hope that this structure, too, can change.

Daly’s understanding of structures assists with determining if structural clericalism and hierarchicalism are just or unjust. Since structural clericalism consistently overlooks the needs of the faithful and favors priests, and hierarchicalism overlooks the needs of the wider ecclesial body and protects bishops, both can be considered structures of vice because of their consistent orientation toward injustice.

Daly asserts that structures can change when the collective practices, experiences, institutions, paradigms, and narratives change. This suggests that structures change as social groups and individual members change. This is consistent with what Kelly calls “general wisdom,” according to which structures of sin change through personal and structural conversion.⁴¹ Daly notes seven situations that

³⁷ Julie Hanlon Rubio and Paul J. Schutz, *Beyond “Bad Apples”: Understanding Clergy Perpetrated Sexual Abuse as a Structural Problem and Cultivating Strategies for Change*, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education (2022), 1.

³⁸ Rubio and Schutz, *Beyond “Bad Apples,”* *passim*.

³⁹ James F. Keenan, “Hierarchicalism,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (2022): 84–108. Keenan uses the term “culture” to refer to hierarchicalism, but his observations of positions and relationships within hierarchicalism suggest that hierarchicalism is a structure.

⁴⁰ Kennan, “Hierarchicalism,” 94.

⁴¹ Kelly, “Nature and Operation of Structural Sin,” 313.

contribute to structural change.⁴² Most relevant to this project is the second situation, when cognitive categories change. Structures are justified by the categories people use. This justification keeps the structures stagnant and resistant to change. If we can change cognitive categories, we have the power to orient structures of vice towards virtue and justice. Changing cognitive categories requires education grounded in context. For structural change within the Catholic Church to prevent further wounds, safeguarding products should address structures of virtue and vice.

Children and Moral Agency

Along with the evaluation of structures of virtue and vice in the Catholic Church, we must examine the theological position of children and moral agency in the safeguarding process. In her 2020 article “Justice for Children: New Directions for Responding to the Catholic Clergy Abuse Crisis,” Jennifer Beste claims that the assumptions made about children (which she defines as eighteen years and under) and the norms that govern child-adult interactions within Catholic contexts include unaddressed power dynamics that have contributed to the clergy sexual abuse crisis. She states that “it is startling how little attention has focused on Catholic views of children and social norms requiring their passivity, obedience, and submission” and notes that these views have contributed to the targeting of children and adults’ failure to believe children within the Catholic clergy abuse crisis.⁴³ In light of this unhealthy power dynamic, Beste calls for a child-centered account of justice for children, which necessitates a rethinking of the ways in which Catholic adults relate to children and understand children’s moral agency.

Beste’s analysis draws on research findings from her ethnographic study of second graders preparing for their first communion. As she journeyed with children preparing to receive this sacrament, she noticed the coercion involved in children’s participation in the sacrament of reconciliation, which precedes their first participation in the Eucharist. She observes:

When certain children explicitly asked teachers if they *had* to receive the sacrament, the answer was always a firm “yes.” Thus, regardless of their thoughts and feelings, and at times without their assent, some second graders found themselves in a vulnerable position on the scary side of an inescapable power differential: they were essentially being

⁴² Daly, *Structures of Virtue*, 85.

⁴³ Jennifer Beste, “Justice for Children: New Directions for Responding to the Catholic Clergy Abuse Crisis,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40, no. 2 (2020): 345.

coerced to confess bad things they had done to a priest who represented God.⁴⁴

There are multiple unhealthy dynamics at play in these interactions that have theo-ethical implications for the ways we educate children within Catholic contexts. One of these unhealthy dynamics is the obvious coercion of children as they participate in the sacramental life of the church, under the assumption that they lack any ability to make moral choices for themselves.⁴⁵ Another is the power adults—and particularly Catholic leaders—have to coerce children past what they are comfortable with due to their religiously sanctioned authority. Relationships with unequal power exercised through coercion can create an unjust structure.

By failing to recognize and empower the moral agency of Catholic youth, adults and religious leaders are making youth more vulnerable to abuse. Thus, Beste proposes that adults need to affirm children's religious and moral agency throughout faith formation and invite them to exercise their rights and responsibilities.⁴⁶ This entails demonstrating to children the tools and skills needed to understand their own moral agency (especially within religious contexts) and "strengthen that muscle," so to speak, within their interactions with others. As Beste notes, "Children who grow up in a culture of supportive adults where moral discernment and agency are encouraged, and in which their experiences, ideas, feelings, and intuitions matter, are less likely to be targeted for sexual victimization and more likely to disclose abuse to trusted adults."⁴⁷ Her statement points to a structure of virtue, where children's agency is considered and developed through discernment. In the unequal relationship between children and adults, the latter's refusal to recognize the moral agency of children contributes to a structure oriented toward injustice,

⁴⁴ Beste, "Justice for Children," 350. See also Gunda Werner, "Specifically Catholic: At the Intersection of Power, Maleness, Holiness, and Sexualized Violence. A Theological and Historical Comment on Power," *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 27 (2019): 153. Werner also discusses the power dynamics present in the sacrament of confession, stating that this type of institutionalized control and understanding of sin has contributed to the abuse of power and sexualized violence in the church.

⁴⁵ While encouraging children to perform activities important for their development may feel similar (like cleaning their rooms, going to the doctor, or taking a basic math course), activities that require moral discernment such as sacramental involvement that invalidates their moral agency can be seen as unhealthy since it must be undertaken freely and willingly by the person as a moral agent. See CCC, no. 1450: "Penance requires the sinner to endure all things *willingly*" [emphasis added].

⁴⁶ Beste, "Justice for Children," 354.

⁴⁷ Beste, "Justice for Children," 355.

while recognizing and encouraging moral agency contributes to a structure of virtue.

This unhealthy power structure prescribing uncritical obedience to adults and male clergy in particular, can also be traced to patriarchal theologies of God and *ecclesia*. In her article “Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuses Crisis,” Susan Ross identifies (among other harmful theologies) the patriarchal feminization of the church (and thus, the laity) and masculinization of the priest as a contributing factor to the culture of sexual violence. This patriarchal model of church “envision[s] the non-ordained laity as the ‘spotless bride’ of Christ: receptive, docile, and obedient, and thus reluctant to challenge or question the clergy even when abuse is suspected.”⁴⁸ Tina Beattie recognizes a similar dynamic at work in the nuptial ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, noting that his interpretation of this spotless bride includes forcible penetration by a male God in imagery remarkably similar to rape.⁴⁹ Beattie suggests a re-envisioning of the symbol of gender.⁵⁰ Ross argues that one constructive theological step forward would be to resist “gendered theology that sees men as divinely ordained leaders and the laity as docile receivers.”⁵¹ Instead, it is necessary to empower the laity—including, and most importantly, children—by emphasizing the priesthood of all believers and the primary role of one’s conscience in discerning moral actions.⁵² Children have their own, developing agency.⁵³ An exercise in conscience formation assists that development. Thus, any involvement in the conversion of structures of power that contribute to sexual abuse by Catholic leaders must address children through encouraging awareness of their conscience. This requires education that meets children where they are, speaking to what is relevant to their lives and contexts as a way of developing their moral agency.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ross, “Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” 639. See also Susan A. Ross, “The Church as ‘Spotless Bride,’” in *One Bread, One Body, One Church: Essays on the Ecclesia of Christ Today in Honor of Bernard P. Prusak*, ed. Daniel Minch and Christopher Cimorelli (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 261–280.

⁴⁹ Tina Beattie, “Crisis in the Context of Nuptial Ecclesiology and the Theology of Priesthood,” in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, ed. Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023), 209.

⁵⁰ Beattie, “Crisis in the Context of Nuptial Ecclesiology,” 211.

⁵¹ Ross, “Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” 650.

⁵² For more feminist interpretations of conscience formation, see Anne E. Patrick, *Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

⁵³ James McEvoy, “Toward a Theology of Childhood: Children’s Agency and the Reign of God,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019): 691.

⁵⁴ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1981), *passim*. Freire suggests that educators help people develop agency through education grounded in what is relevant to their context.

Right Relationships

Another theological foundation on which to build future safeguarding initiatives is right relationships. Encouraging children to develop autonomy and awareness of the still, small voice of God speaking through their conscience happens through relationships, a central tenet of the Christian tradition. The concepts of relationship and maintaining right relationships are firmly rooted in the theology of a relational Trinity.⁵⁵ Describing how the human person is sanctified by entering into relationships, in *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis notes that “in this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (no. 240). The triune nature of God exemplifies perfect relationship—a rightness of relationship in which, through the grace of God, all have the opportunity to partake. In this way, right relationship is an important theological concept supporting education that helps prevent IPV and all forms of violence and oppression, and truly values the human dignity of others. It also mitigates a reductive theological anthropology confining children or laity to the role of obedience to hierarchical authority and contributes to a structure of virtue, using the Trinity as exemplar.

Relationship rooted in Trinity is not merely a lofty idea but one that can govern and guide individual and collective actions. Elizabeth Johnson describes the function of the Trinity in the world thus:

The Trinity functions as a source of vision to shape our actions in the world, a criterion to measure the fidelity of our lives, and a basis for resisting every form of oppression that diminishes community. . . . The church is to be a living symbol of divine communion turned toward the world in inclusive and compassionate love. Only a community of equal persons related in profound mutuality, pouring out praise of God and care for the world in need, only such a church corresponds to the triune God it purports to serve.⁵⁶

Trinity is a basis for resisting oppression that diminishes community—in the case of the sexual abuse crisis, the triune relationship is a source of communal power to root out the structures of vice that enable

⁵⁵ As in the theology of Karl Barth according to Gary Deddo, “The Grammar of Barth’s Theology of Personal Relations,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47, no. 2 (1994): 192, 212. See also Jose Miguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1983), 85: “God acts in righteousness when he establishes and reestablishes right relationships.”

⁵⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 223.

continued abuse, including the lack of preventative education. The Trinity is an inspiration and calls all to be “persons related in profound mutuality,” caring for a world in need. This encompasses not only the abuse crisis with the necessary comfort and healing of those abused as well as the prevention of further abuse, but also—in a world determined by inhumane structures, built on ideology that protects the few rather than structures rooted in compassion and love—structures where neighbors are cared for and oriented toward the common good.

This relationality is not only important for the content of any safeguarding workshop but also forms a necessary theological foundation for these interventions to shape a community oriented toward justice. Regarding relationality, Denise Ackermann argues that it “emerges from [the] hermeneutical understanding of the injunction by Jesus Christ that ‘You must love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mark 12:31). . . . Active loving of self and neighbor is understood as the praxis of right relationship. Communal right relationship is the essence of justice-centred praxis. Such praxis is liberating and reflects the values of the reign of God.”⁵⁷ In order to enact communal right relationship—a justice-centered praxis resulting in structures of virtue—educational intervention ought to be grounded in a theology of right relationship. Offering youth tools to recognize power imbalances and abuse is a fundamental step in empowering others to exercise their autonomy in avoiding oppressive or exploitative relationships within, intimate relationships, the family, the Catholic Church, and anywhere in the world.

Encouraging right relationships in others involves offering the tools needed to recognize aspects of relationships contrary to the value of human dignity and thus identify structures of vice. In discussing right relationships, John Humbach names this reality succinctly: “A relationship is not ‘right’ if participants seek to overbear in power (oppress), to overreach in resources (exploit), or to mislead for selfish advantage (manipulate).”⁵⁸ In relationship education, building educational interventions that offer skills to recognize and interrupt oppressive, exploitative, or manipulative behavior upholds the Christian values of human dignity, right relationships, and moral agency. In order to identify these practices, one must be literate in relational power dynamics. Humbach describes “not-right” relationships as not oriented toward justice. To build structures of virtue and change structures of vice requires evaluating structures for

⁵⁷ Denise Ackermann, “Meaning and Power: Some Key Terms in Feminist Liberation Theology,” *Scriptura* 44 (1993): 25.

⁵⁸ John A. Humbach, “Towards a Natural Justice of Right Relationships,” in *Human Rights in Philosophy and Practice*, ed. Burton M. Leiser and Tom D. Campbell (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2001), 44.

oppression, manipulation, and exploitation and seeking to alter them. Education in power literacy is key to this change.

Theology and Power Literacy

Since the perpetration of sexual abuse is rooted in a structure that promotes an unhealthy dynamic of power and control, religious leaders and other adults must be able to understand these dynamics in order to better identify and respond to abuse within pastoral contexts. In her article "Seeing Power: Pastoral Recognition and Response to Intimate Partner Abuse," Jeanne Hoeft calls for pastors to be equipped to "trace the dynamics of power in interpersonal relationships" and speak theologically about God's relationship to power and our own use of power.⁵⁹ To do so, a theology of power that emphasizes mutuality rather than a unilateral or hierarchical model of relationship is necessary, taking into account the various social identities and contexts influencing the way power moves within those relationships.

Hoeft understands God to be "the power of relationship itself" and "the dynamic Spirit that moves through relationship that binds all of creation."⁶⁰ God's gift of power to humans, which can move people to life-giving actions, can be misused by humans when power is used to coerce or abuse another, creating a structure of vice. Philosopher Martin Buber identifies all violence as a shift from an "I-Thou" to an "I-It" relationship, in which the other is seen as an object rather than a person.⁶¹ James Newton Poling identifies the ideal purpose (or telos) of power in human relationships to be "communion and enlarged freedom."⁶² Poling notes that "the power that is intended by God for everyone who lives is used to destroy relationships in exchange for control."⁶³ Human sin can draw away from this goal of communion and freedom due to fear and the desire for control.

Since humans are always in relationship with one another, "we are always influencing the whole web of creation, however minutely," explains Hoeft.⁶⁴ All people have power within their relationships, but some have more or less power than others due to their social identity (determined by race, gender, and class) and context. In the clergy-parishioner relationship, a male priest carries authority as consecrated spiritual leader who acts "in persona Christi" in sacramental life, as well as the male privilege of living in a patriarchal society and church.

⁵⁹ Jeanne Hoeft, "Seeing Power: Pastoral Recognition and Response to Intimate Partner Abuse," *INTAMS Review* 17, (2011): 153.

⁶⁰ Hoeft, "Seeing Power," 154.

⁶¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Scribner's, 1970).

⁶² Poling, *The Abuse of Power*, 27.

⁶³ Poling, *The Abuse of Power*, 27.

⁶⁴ Hoeft, "Seeing Power," 154.

In a pastoral setting, it is imperative that religious leaders accompany children and the laity in recognizing their own power and identifying when power is being used to enrich or to diminish and destroy life. Power difference as associated with roles leads to situational vulnerability, where some persons are not only vulnerable because they are human but also because others assume roles endowed with more authority, such as in the clergy-parishioner dynamics.⁶⁵ Having a theology of power that emphasizes mutuality between parties can help those most vulnerable (especially children) recognize their ability to respond to unhealthy relational dynamics and make choices based on their own God-given power.⁶⁶

Inherent in the discussion of power in relationships is domination and liberation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza critiques the predominant understanding of authority within the Catholic tradition as one of domination and control, and advocates instead for authority in the name of service and liberation.⁶⁷ She states, “Authority within the Church as the discipleship community of equals must not be realized as ‘power over,’ as domination and submission, but as the enabling, energizing, creative authority of orthopraxis that not only preaches the Gospel of salvation but also has the power to liberate the oppressed and to make people whole and happy.”⁶⁸ Conversion of structures of vice within the Catholic Church allows for the liberative message of the Gospel to be spread more freely.

In her famous theological work *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, M. Shawn Copeland identifies post-Enlightenment Christianity as a religion that “partnered with the dynamics of domination.”⁶⁹ The way to counter this dynamic—and, in turn, to fulfill the Christian demand to love the neighbor—is a praxis of solidarity. Copeland states, “Through a praxis of solidarity, we not only apprehend and are moved by the suffering of the other, we confront and address its oppressive cause and shoulder the other’s suffering. . . . Solidarity sets the dynamics of love against the dynamics of domination.”⁷⁰ This praxis of solidarity links believers to the radical

⁶⁵ Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos, “Vulnerability, Ecclesial Abuse, and ‘Vulnerable Adults,’” in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, 36.

⁶⁶ Michelle Becka makes a similar point about the necessity of dismantling structures that contribute to vulnerable agency as related to power in her essay “Sexual Abuse in the Church and the Violation of Vulnerable Agency,” in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, 11–25.

⁶⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Claiming our Authority and Power,” in *The Teaching Authority of the Believers*, ed. Johann-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), 52.

⁶⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Claiming our Authority and Power,” 52.

⁶⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 86.

⁷⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 94.

solidarity Jesus showed on the cross, which is the site of liberation for all those who suffer.

If abuse is unjust “power over” another person, then a relationship based on reciprocity and mutuality becomes one where power is shared, or “power with.”⁷¹ Discussing the issue of violence against women in light of the biblical story of Tamar, Pamela Cooper-White describes “power-with” as “the power of an individual to reach out in a manner that negates neither self nor other.”⁷² Cooper-White builds upon this concept by proposing the idea of “power-in-community” to conceptualize the way relational power always is situated within a larger community. In this paradigm, “power is not only owned then shared, but also held within this matrix of community, a matrix of accountability, of containment and checks and balances.”⁷³ A Catholic theology of power literacy not only necessitates categorically excluding abuse from relationships but demands a mutuality that upholds, encourages, and enhances the power of the other—a power inherent in our divinely-rooted image and likeness and emulation of the holy dynamism of the trinitarian relationships. Within the Catholic community, all members must recognize the abuse of power by Catholic leaders as an abuse affecting the entire community (not limited to a few “bad apples”), and that the community has the power to hold accountable individuals who abuse. Striving toward elimination of systemic injustice and abuse of power moves the Catholic community toward structures of virtue with mutual power sharing, where children’s agency is respected, laity empowered, and justice reigns.

In sum, in conjunction with the best practices of naming the church’s historic complicity in intimate partner violence, creating an atmosphere that recognizes the multi-gendered nature of abuse, and interrogating gendered masculine assumptions that create a culture of power inequality and abuse, we can frame future educational interventions with the following theological assumptions: 1) human structures can be rooted in sin and vice but can also be re-oriented toward justice; 2) children have moral agency and can be empowered to identify abuse through relevant education that meets them where they are and forms their consciences; 3) cultivating right relationships, as exemplified by the Trinity, can encourage an atmosphere in which identifying exploitation, manipulation, oppression, or other

⁷¹ Anne Bathurst Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free: Interpreting Sexual Theo-Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1995), 7. See also Christine Firer Hinze, *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1995), 259, for an analysis of two descriptive models of power: “power-over” and “power-to.”

⁷² Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 55.

⁷³ Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 53.

invalidation of human dignity becomes stitched into the fabric of our human structure and has the power to convert structures of vice into structures oriented toward justice; and 4) recognizing our God-given power and critiquing power in personal and social relationships are not only moral goods but an ongoing requirement for the evaluation of our structures to ensure avoidance of vice and embrace of virtue—shifting our frame from “power-over” to “power-with” others.

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS: THE EMPOWERING THE LAITY PROJECT

For the *Taking Responsibility: Jesuit Institutions Confront the Causes and Legacy of Clergy Sexual Abuse* grant project sponsored by Fordham University,⁷⁴ the Marquette University research team chose to focus on empowering the laity through educational interventions for both adolescents and adults. Our research team focused on adolescents as an important but often unaddressed subset of the laity, specifically Catholic youth being educated in Catholic parishes and schools throughout the US.⁷⁵ Our goal was to review existing safeguarding curricula to see how they addressed power and structures, and then create a workshop based on our assessment of the curricula, prioritizing the theological concepts outlined in the previous section.

Safeguarding Materials Analysis

We began this project intending to request and review samples from publishers of child abuse prevention materials used in Catholic contexts. Upon further research, we found a 2018 spreadsheet from the USCCB that listed how US dioceses were addressing abuse prevention.⁷⁶ The sheet contained safeguarding materials used across 196 dioceses, archdioceses, and eparchies. There were 161 different materials used for adolescents, with additional materials for adult

⁷⁴ In 2019, Fordham University received a grant for Jesuit educational institutions to “confront the causes and legacy of clergy sexual abuse” in the United States. The grant project, named *Taking Responsibility*, funded unique research by Fordham faculty and nine other Jesuit universities over the course of 2.5 years. According to the *Taking Responsibility* website, the overall aim of the grant project is “to explore the relationship between the structures of Roman Catholic and Jesuit institutions of secondary and higher education and the phenomena of clergy sexual abuse and its systematic concealment.” The various research projects that emerge from the grant highlight ways in which Jesuit educational institutions can both “repair the harms caused by clergy sexual abuse and its concealment,” and “[ensure] the protection and well-being of children and vulnerable adults” in the present and future (takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu/).

⁷⁵ “Best Practices for Lay Empowerment: Adolescent Track,” 2023, takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu/marquette-youth-track/.

⁷⁶ USCCB, “Safe Environment Training Program Compilation,” 2018, www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/2018-Safe-Environment-Programs.pdf.

volunteers, priests, and deacons. Eleven producers created about 51 percent of the material used in the US. The top three producers were VIRTUS, Circle of Grace, and Praesidium (about 32 percent of all products listed). The remaining 49 percent of materials were labeled as “self-generated” or “other,” which included local and government agencies, diocese self-made material, and what we considered “unspecified materials,” often listed vaguely as “safeguarding materials,” “various,” an agency name (for example, New York State), video name (e.g., *Yellow Dino*), or nothing at all.

After identifying these curricula, our team attempted to search sample curricula for content review. Unfortunately, many products did not contain online material for adolescents. One publisher refused to provide samples. Another publisher insisted we purchase the full product as meant for a parish or diocese, which was beyond our budget capacity. Despite these barriers, we did, however, gain some access to the top three products (VIRTUS, Circle of Grace, and Praesidium) through company and parish websites and personal experiences with safeguarding training through our diocese.⁷⁷ If a healthy use of power means reciprocal sharing, the barriers in place to access safeguarding materials themselves hint at an unhealthy use. This pattern of barriers might also indicate a structure at work in the safeguarding material publishing world.

Lack of Congruence with Best Practices

Twenty years later, while a requirement for safeguarding still appears in the Dallas Charter, its overall implementation is inconsistent. In 2020, the National Review Board expressed concerns about complacency in the overall implementation of the Dallas Charter, due in part to the lack of consistency of safeguarding products.⁷⁸ Stephanie Dallam and her colleagues from Child USA surveyed the thirty-two archdioceses and the safeguarding information

⁷⁷ Across 196 dioceses and eparchies, approximately 16 percent used VIRTUS (www.virtusonline.org/virtus/protecting_children.cfm), 9.92 percent used Circle of Grace, the safeguarding program for the Archdiocese of Omaha (archomaha.org/circleofgrace/), and 6.7 percent used Praesidium (www.praesidiuminc.com/). Of note is the fact that more than 49 percent of dioceses and eparchies identified their safeguarding programs as “self-generated” including terms like “Theology of the Body,” local agency or government materials (e.g., “State of Iowa”), and unspecified materials labeled “various” or “Safe Environment Program.” Moreover, there are no uniform educational standards that these programs must meet.

⁷⁸ Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, National Review Board, and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2020), vii–ix, www.usccb.org/resources/CYP%20Annual%20Report%202020.pdf.

available on their websites.⁷⁹ They found a lack of standardization in the training material—a finding reflected in our review as well.

While Dallam and her team were not intending to review safeguarding curricula, they had one observation that might impact those materials: consistency with best practices in child abuse prevention. For example, only 19 percent of the 32 archdioceses required child abuse prevention training to happen *before* working with children, while best practices suggest all training should be completed before working with children, not after.⁸⁰ If there is inconsistency with best practices in administering training, there may be inconsistency with best practices in the content of the training as well, which we examine below.

Theological Gaps

The solutions outlined in the Dallas charter have generally focused on epidemiological or criminal rather than theological responses, an opinion shared by Massimo Faggioli.⁸¹ We saw this in the safeguarding materials reviewed. While some programs started and ended with prayer, many did not. Across the products we could access, some had little to no connection with the theological tradition of the Catholic church; at times, frameworks contradicted Catholic teaching, like using the word “molester,” which reduces the understanding of the human person to an act—molesting—as the sole identifier.

The one product we were able to review in depth was VIRTUS, used by about 17 percent of dioceses and eparchies, and in 44 percent of archdioceses (as noted by Dallam’s team).⁸² In our review of VIRTUS materials for adult volunteers working with children and the teaching guide for training children, we found that they differed from other products in that they included sections of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and connected them with child abuse prevention. The CCC has faced critique for how it conceptualizes abuse and sexual violence. In her feminist ethical analysis of rape culture as a social sin, Megan McCabe cites that in the catechism “rape is framed as an offense against charity, along with masturbation, fornication, pornography, and prostitution” and “implicitly presents rape as primarily a manifestation of uncontrolled lust.”⁸³ She describes rape

⁷⁹ Stephanie Dallam, Marci Hamilton, and Sabine Glocker, “Survey of the Written Child Protection Policies of the 32 US Archdioceses,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 30, no. 7 (2021): 7.

⁸⁰ Dallam, Hamilton, and Glocker, “Survey of the Child Protection Policies,” 13.

⁸¹ Massimo Faggioli and Mary Catherine O’Reilly-Gindhart, “A New Wave in the Modern History of the Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church: Literature Overview, 2018–2020,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2021): 157.

⁸² Dallam, Hamilton, and Glocker, “Survey of the Child Protection Policies,” 7.

⁸³ Megan K. McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic Response to the Social Sin of Rape Culture,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 4 (2018): 636.

culture as a pervasive social reality, and notes that the catechism “fails to account for the social and political context and meaning of sexual violence,” thereby neglecting to attribute the existence of rape culture as a social sin that affects everyone who participates in society, whether or not they have been victim of sexual violence.⁸⁴ The CCC neglects the “pervasive social reality” that seems endemic to rape culture and its embodiment in the Catholic Church. A safeguarding program grounded in the CCC alone risks perpetuating rape culture, the opposite of what safeguarding is intended to do. As Daly and Kelly note in their work on the theology of structures, the social and political contextualization of sexual abuse by Catholic leaders is essential to understanding and formulating a safeguarding response rooted in theology.

In addition, our review of the material relevant to safeguarding identified three theological gaps: lack of reference to social ethics, lack of attention to healthy and unhealthy uses of power, and lack of emphasis on the social effects of sexual abuse. These gaps should be addressed by the theological concepts of right relationships, power, and structures described in the previous section.

Gap 1: Lack of Reference to Social Ethics

Few of the materials available addressed social ethics and Catholic social teaching, a necessary foundation due to the social nature of this phenomenon. As previously mentioned, one brochure found via an internet search referred to people who sexually abuse children as “molesters.” While abuse of any form should not be condoned, referring to those who commit sexual abuse as molesters is dehumanizing language and therefore contradictory to the fundamental Catholic conviction that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. The use of dehumanizing language can be addressed with the inclusion of the Catholic social principle that all humans are created with inherent dignity. With a rich tradition of theological discourse on navigating social concerns, it is crucial to include these critical theological affirmations of human dignity and the common good.

One way of including social ethics in abuse prevention education would be to define the concept of social sin. One of the defining characteristics of social sin is that all humans who participate in society are accountable for the presence of this sin, and its cause cannot be reduced to the actions of one individual. McCabe states that explicitly naming the systemic injustice of rape culture as a social sin “communicates that this situation is moral evil, for which human

⁸⁴ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic Response,” 636.

beings bear responsibility, and which is against the will of God.”⁸⁵ Christine M. Smith defines sin as a “violation of right relation, a sign of our brokenheartedness, a betrayal of trust, the reign of injustice, the consequence of disparities of power, and as tyrannical systems of oppression,” situating all sin as embedded in the society that allows it to exist.⁸⁶

Gap 2: Lack of Attention to Healthy and Unhealthy Uses of Power

VIRTUS and other materials we reviewed also lacked sufficient attention to power, particularly power in relationships. Although VIRTUS produced a short supplemental training guide on healthy relationships which briefly discusses the use of power, this topic was not centered in the primary safeguarding material for youth. Marie Keenan, an expert in Catholic clergy sexual abuse of minors, insists that power must be considered in any discussion of and response to child sexual abuse.⁸⁷ In her article about clergy sexual abuse, Ross wrote that the crisis “is not only about sex or abuse. It is also about unchecked, divinely sanctioned patriarchal power and its devastating consequences.”⁸⁸ In fact, many theologians conceptualize sexual abuse by anyone, including Catholic leaders, as first an abuse of power, power that one person has and abuses.⁸⁹ These scholars note that unjust use of power is present in any situation of abuse, whether child or adult, sexual, or some other form. Therefore, sexual violence prevention education material can be strengthened through power literacy, with a focus on how to identify healthy and unhealthy uses of power.

Gap 3: Lack of Emphasis on Structural Sin

Sexual abuse by Catholic leaders is not only a sin between individuals, perpetrator and victim, but something more complex: a structure of sin, an interlocking web of relationships that contributes to the reality of sexual abuse by Catholic leaders. When examining this abuse crisis in light of social ethics and a theology of power, the

⁸⁵ McCabe, “Social Sin of Rape Culture,” 650.

⁸⁶ Christine M. Smith, “Sin and Evil in Feminist Thought,” *Theology Today* 50, no. 2 (1993): 210–211.

⁸⁷ Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123.

⁸⁸ Susan A. Ross, “Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019): 632.

⁸⁹ See for example Jack Lee Downey, “Colonialism Is Abuse: Reconsidering Triumphalist Narratives in Catholic Studies,” *American Catholic Studies* 130, no. 2 (2019): 16–20, doi.org/10.1353/acs.2019.0034; James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991); Béatrice Guillon, “Victimes d’abus dans l’Église. Pour une théologie de la vulnérabilité, de la responsabilité, et de la guérison,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 144, no. 1 (2022): 24–37.

concept of structures of sin must be recognized and its role dealt with honestly. Returning to McCabe's critique of the CCC, to fully understand and respond to sexual abuse by Catholic leaders one should consider the structures that contribute to its continuation. Right relationship, something present in the trainings we saw, is presented as reporting people seen as unsafe or "bad." There is no recognition of individuals who may have been complicit with abuse or inappropriate behavior, of specialized treatment of priests that allowed the abuse to continue (clericalism), or gender roles that emphasize obedience to authority. Considering structures of sin that must be addressed is imperative to creating a culture of safeguarding. Structures are created through webs of relationships; therefore, if we are striving to be in right relationships with each other, we must also be aware of structures impeding those relationships and actively work to change them.⁹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAFEGUARDING TRAINING THAT BETTER EMPOWER AND EQUIP YOUTH

In the spirit of educating youth as a way to transform unjust structures, we conclude by offering some recommendations for safeguarding training that can better empower youth to identify and understand unhealthy and healthy relationship dynamics and equip them with the knowledge that they have moral agency to discern how to use their own power within unjust structures. These recommendations are based on our workshop titled *Empowering Relationships: Adolescents, Power, and Relationships*, offered to two Catholic teen groups in the Midwest.⁹¹ Our workshop was designed to help adolescents understand how power dynamics can affect relationships in both supportive and abusive ways from Catholic theological roots in human dignity and right relationships. Our primary goal was for participants to reflect critically on relationships and power dynamics so that they will be more equipped to understand their role and autonomy in healthy and unhealthy relationships. Our recommendations are based on pedagogical discussions about what should be included in the workshop, the gaps found in reviewing safeguarding curricula, as well as theological grounding in structures, children's moral agency, right relationship, and theology of power literacy discussed above.

First, to combat structural clericalism we educated youth about the role of power in relationships and society. Since sexual abuse (as well

⁹⁰ Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 342.


⁹¹ Karen Ross, Mark A. Levand, and Cathy Melesky Dante, "Empowering Relationships: Adolescents, Power, and Relationships," 2022, takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Healthy-Relationships-Teaching-Guide-and-Resources.pdf.

as other forms of abuse) is rooted in abuse of power, youth must be able to name the ways power dynamics influence relationships, as well as factors that impact their own autonomy in relationships, like gender, race, or age (to name only a few). In our workshop, we did this by introducing an icebreaker activity that prompted participants to discuss who has more power in a specific relationship and whence this power comes.

Second, implicit in discussions about power ought to be discussions about how gender scripts contribute to power within society. For our workshop, we included case studies of unhealthy relationships, providing gender neutral names for each of the characters. This practice allowed for participants to explore the implications of how power dynamics and gender relate, and how gender scripts, roles, and expectations can influence relationships in their own lives.

Third, safeguarding trainings that seek to prevent abuse within a Catholic context must ground their lessons in theological concepts of social ethics, power literacy, and recognition of structural impacts of these harms within the church and society. We observed these theological gaps in our limited review of prevention education materials used in dioceses and eparchies throughout the US. There is a rich tradition of Catholic social ethics that can contribute to pedagogical conversations about abuse prevention within the church. In our workshop, we provided key concepts from the Catholic social tradition in order to provide faith connections: namely, the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and human rights and responsibilities. We also provided an example of the way Jesus used his power to help and show solidarity with others (the raising of Lazarus, Luke 7:12–17). A theological lesson on structures of virtue and vice can greatly enrich youth understanding of how the sexual abuse crisis has been allowed to persist, and its far-reaching effects in and outside the church. While because of time constraints we did not include this in our workshop, we would encourage future presentations to include education on structures and how they work from a theological perspective.

Lastly, we recommend that prior to any new development or revision of safeguarding curricula, adults ask youth what they need and would like to learn about the topics of abuse and violence. This involves meeting youth where they are and being mindful of their context as young adults growing and learning in an ever-changing digital world, as well as their social location. This attentiveness to what youth need presents an opportunity for active listening on the part of Catholic leaders and allows youth to contribute their own creativity in responding to this crisis, fulfilling Pope Francis's vision of a listening church.

Together, all can work to protect God's children. As theologians committed to the holistic flourishing of all people—especially the most vulnerable among us—this work offers additional theological reflection toward a more pervasive, consistent, and theologically-based culture of safeguarding. Changing culture requires changing structures. Educating youth about power contributes to converting structures that inhibit flourishing into ones allowing all people to flourish. Regular evaluation of these structures and their impact and effectiveness is crucial to this process. We invite others to evaluate our work, publicly available on the *Taking Responsibility* website.⁹² In doing so, the Catholic Church can become an inspiration for other communities where abuse is prevalent and support a world suffused with a culture of safeguarding. 

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⁹² Ross, Levand, and Melesky Dante, *Empowering Relationships*.