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‘A moral injury’: How a Xavier professor measured the damage caused by clergy abuse

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The Rev. Geoff Drew appears before Hamilton County Common Pleas Judge Leslie Ghiz to plead guilty to nine counts of rape. The Cincinnati priest was accused of raping an altar boy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Cara Owsley/The Enquirer*

Marcus Mescher got an email a few years ago from a woman who thought he might listen to her when no one else would.

She didn’t know Mescher, a theology professor at Xavier University, but she was a fan of a book he’d written about why Catholics should love and support one another. She said she had no one else to turn to because her church and its parishioners abandoned her after she accused a priest of sexually abusing her years earlier.

“I feel like a casualty,” she wrote. “Like I’ve literally been left for dead.”

Over time, Mescher spoke to other survivors of clergy abuse. And the more he listened to their stories, the more he saw a common thread: These survivors

didn't just suffer physical and emotional trauma. They suffered a moral trauma, too.

They felt alone and unworthy, left behind by their church, their faith and their God.

As a devout Catholic, Mescher saw their plight as a tragedy. As a professor and researcher, he wanted to quantify the damage done to them, to measure it, somehow, with statistical evidence.

"You can't really heal a wound unless you understand the scope of the harm," Mescher said.

His goal was to understand what happens to survivors and their fellow Catholics when they are betrayed not only by someone they trust, but by someone as central to their faith as a priest, someone who is supposed to be the embodiment of Jesus Christ.

More than two years after his email exchange with the abuse survivor, Mescher and a team of researchers at Xavier have produced a first-of-its-kind study that explores the "moral injury" caused by clergy sexual abuse and its concealment by the Catholic church.

Their report, released last month, found the trauma of moral injury extended beyond survivors, reaching Catholics who were never abused. Some experienced anger, anxiety or an erosion of trust. Others chose sides, turning away from either the church or abuse survivors.

The report's findings suggest clergy abuse isn't a problem of the past, as polls say roughly 1 in 4 Catholics believe, because so much spiritual and emotional damage remains.

Studying the extent of that damage wasn't easy, Mescher said. The interviews with survivors were gut-wrenching. Some church officials wouldn't cooperate. And there was no model to guide the team because no one had ever done a study of clergy abuse like this before.

The researchers were starting from scratch, and they were asking a question that seemed almost impossible to answer.

How do you measure someone's spiritual and emotional pain?

Cincinnati church officials say no to study

From the outset, Mescher knew there would be challenges. He was, after all, a Catholic professor at a Catholic university investigating one of the most divisive issues to confront the Catholic Church in centuries.

Not everyone would think his study was a good idea. That included officials at the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, who turned down Mescher when he asked them to participate.

But when Mescher pitched the idea to Xavier officials back in 2020, they signed off on it. He later won a grant from another Catholic institution, Fordham University, to assemble a team to help do the work.

Then came the hard part.

Because no one had ever applied the concept of moral injury to clergy abuse, Mescher and his team started looking around for guidance. They found it in the military, where moral injury has been studied for years.

For combat veterans, a moral injury might occur when someone follows an order or acts in a way that conflicts with long-held moral or religious beliefs. Examples could include shooting a civilian in battle or mistreating a prisoner.

The fallout from such trauma often resembles post-traumatic stress disorder because it can cause extreme anxiety and depression.

But moral trauma runs deeper, causing those suffering from it to question their own judgment and values. They ask themselves how they could be good people after doing something they believe is bad.

"Guilt, shame, disgust and anger are some of the hallmark reactions of moral injury," according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mescher encountered some of those same feelings among survivors of clergy abuse, who, in his view, were likely traumatized not only by the abuse, but by the abuser's place at the heart of their faith.

Catholics are taught from an early age that a priest is more than just an authority figure in the church. When a Catholic priest is ordained, he is ordained *in persona Christi*, or "in the person of Christ."

So when a priest baptizes a baby, hears a confession or consecrates the Eucharist during Mass, he is doing so as Christ.

A betrayal by such a person is unlike any other, Mescher said.

"There is a unique kind of moral injury caused by clergy sexual abuse because of who the priest represents," he said. "What they do, they do as Christ."

'Why can't you just get over it?'

Understanding the problem was essential, but it wasn't enough.

Mescher and his team needed a way to quantify the damage, to literally put a number to it.

Once again, they turned to research in other fields, particularly in the military, where psychologists have used interviews and questionnaires to help determine the severity of someone's moral injury. The questionnaires typically asked patients to say how strongly they agreed or disagreed with dozens of statements related to their trauma, such as "I feel betrayed by those I once trusted."

After ranking the answers to those questions, on a scale of 1 to 5, for example, a treating physician could assign a number value to the moral injury. The higher the number, the greater the injury.

Mescher thought a similar approach could work with clergy abuse survivors, so his team created a survey with 59 questions and began sharing it with support groups and other advocates.

More than 60 abuse survivors agreed to join the Xavier study. "It's been a reminder to me that survivors are everywhere," Mescher said.

Dan Frondorf was one of them. The West Side native waited years to tell anyone about being abused by a priest in the 1980s, fearing no one would believe him if he accused a popular priest who'd been a pastor and high school principal.

The priest, Lawrence Strittmatter, eventually was dismissed from the priesthood when dozens of others said he'd abused them, too.

Frondorf, who left the church years ago, wondered if the Xavier study might help him understand why he continued to struggle with feelings of distrust and alienation for so long after the abuse.

"So many times, people have said to me, 'Why can't you just get over it?'" said Frondorf, now a leader of Cincinnati's Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "It's not that simple. It's a different kind of harm."

He said he's lost more than people realize. "A lot of my friends and family are still involved with the church," he said. "I don't have that anymore."

The team's interviews with other survivors revealed that feelings of loss, shame and anxiety were common. "I felt I was a failure and just let everyone down," one survivor told Xavier professor Ashley Theuring, who conducted the interviews. "The level of shame was almost unbearable."

"I couldn't sleep. I couldn't live with myself," said another. "It felt like I had a disease on me."

Catholics who weren't abused also suffer a moral injury

The study found that survivors like Frondorf suffered the greatest moral injury, but they weren't alone.

Mescher's team also reached out to hundreds of Xavier students, who served as a control group for the study, and to church employees, who Mescher reasoned would offer a different perspective because they so closely associated with the church. A total of 389 Catholics participated, including 62 survivors.

Because the Cincinnati archdiocese wouldn't work with him, Mescher contacted officials in other dioceses for help. In the end, 44 church employees responded, most from outside Cincinnati.

When asked why the Archdiocese of Cincinnati didn't participate in the study, a church spokeswoman would say only that the archdiocese's pastoral center was aware of the project and declined to take part.

"We found it a huge challenge to get local church employees to participate," Mescher said. "There is still so much silence and stigma surrounding this issue."

After tallying the moral injury scores from the different groups, the Xavier team found that while survivors suffered the most by a wide margin, the students and, to a lesser extent, the church employees also described damaged trust and other feelings consistent with moral injury.

The highest possible score on the survey was 295. Survivors scored an average of 199, compared to 153 for the students and 130 for church employees.

Mescher is still sorting out what it all means. The full study, including the raw data, the survey questions and a more thorough statistical analysis, is not yet available because it's been submitted for peer review prior to publication.

What is clear, Mescher said, is that clergy abuse isn't just a problem for the abused. If church leaders don't do better for survivors and for all Catholics, he said, clergy abuse will continue to overshadow much of the church's good work.

As a former youth minister who sends his children to Catholic schools and teaches at a Catholic university, Mescher said he's rooting for his church to get it right.

"There's a lot of work to be done," he said.