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Reproductive Abuse in the Context of Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church

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Abstract: In a significant number of cases, clerical sex offenders impregnate their victims and force them into hiding, abortion, or adoption. This phenomenon is referred to in this paper as *reproductive abuse*. Clearly, most victims of reproductive abuse are adults, but even among minor victims of clerical child abuse, between 1 and 10 percent may have experienced reproductive abuse. On the basis of pertinent studies, this paper explores archival material on several dozen allegations of reproductive abuse in the context of clergy sexual abuse of minors in the US Catholic Church. Besides some tentative estimates of the general frequency of the phenomenon, this paper offers a distinction of three different types of reproductive abuse and an analysis of the interplay of clericalist and secular misogyny, which appears to be largely responsible for the silencing of victims as well as for the impunity of perpetrators and leads to the invisibility of this phenomenon, despite the high importance attributed to reproductive issues in the Catholic context.

Keywords: reproductive abuse; reproductive justice; sexual abuse of adults; sexual abuse of minors; clergy sex abuse; coerced adoption; abortion; clericalism; misogyny



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1. Introduction

Regardless of the specific context and even though reproductive abuse clearly “intensifies the effects of sexual violence” (Duggan and Jacobson 2009), it is hardly ever prosecuted by criminal law (Altunjan 2021) and, in many disciplines and contexts, it is still a surprisingly under-discussed topic. This applies not least to research on clergy sex abuse (CSA). While reproductive abuse has been addressed before, mostly in the context of war crimes (UN Secretary-General 2018), sex trafficking (Lederer and Wetzel 2014) or intimate partner/domestic violence (Moore et al. 2010; Coyle et al. 2015), this paper is the first to explore reproductive abuse in the context of CSA in the Catholic Church systematically. Even though research on CSA in the Catholic Church has virtually boomed in recent years, the number of victims who were impregnated by their clerical perpetrators has not been surveyed in any of the major studies, globally.¹

Like every form of abuse, reproductive abuse unfolds in an interplay of power and vulnerability between perpetrators and their victims. Vulnerability is often identified primarily by susceptibility to suffering. Particularly in legal contexts, a very narrow understanding of it usually prevails. But when seen through a philosophical lens, the concept is actually more complex and ambivalent (Gilson 2013; Butler et al. 2016). Being vulnerable for humans essentially means being “susceptible to be affected by incidents and/or conditions beyond their control” (Haker 2020, p. 139). Thus, it also refers to humans’ affectability and openness to the world and to one another as part of the human condition and this makes the concept much more ambivalent than the negative connotation suggests (Gilson 2013).

The specific term *reproductive vulnerability* is sometimes used in medical contexts to denote risks to (female) fertility. I will use the term *reproductive vulnerability* here with a broader and slightly different meaning to denote the susceptibility of a person’s reproductive system to being affected by incidents beyond their control. In general, humans can

control their own reproductivity only to a limited degree, and in this sense, all humans are reproductively vulnerable. One may call this a form of ontological vulnerability. While both male and female reproductive systems are vulnerable in this sense, living with a body that can become pregnant is being vulnerable to a higher degree and in a particularly ambivalent way. On the one hand, it promises the unique experience of conceiving and bearing children. This intimate closeness is perceived by many as maximally gratifying and meaningful. On the other hand, being able to become pregnant means being susceptible to a whole range of specific forms of suffering. This applies to physical ailments such as period pain, endometriosis and adverse pregnancy and birth outcomes up to child loss and maternal mortality (see WHO (World Health Organization) 2019). Specifically for adolescent girls aged 15–19, “pregnancy and childbirth complications are the leading cause of death globally” (WHO (World Health Organization) 2019, p. 48).

Whereas in medical discussions, the term *reproductive power* mostly refers to success in procreation (of various species or populations), in the context of this discussion, I will use the term *reproductive power* as referring to the power to control reproductive life. This control can take place through laws, social or moral norms (Buller and Schulte 2018) or direct personal influence. When persons hold enough reproductive power to make their own reproductive decisions freely, this may be called *reproductive justice* (Chrisler 2012; Ross 2017). However, in many societies, a system of *reproductive injustice* prevails, that forbids those who are particularly reproductively vulnerable to make their own reproductive decisions freely. Regularly, their needs and points of view are not systematically taken into account by those who hold reproductive power, often resulting in restricted reproductive autonomy and adverse pregnancy and birth outcomes for girls and young women, many of them mothers (Freedman and Isaacs 1993; Cook et al. 2003; Traina 2018).

It is one thing for a person to be vulnerable on an *ontological* level because of biological and technical contingencies. It is quite another thing for a person to be vulnerable on a *moral or structural* level by being denied the moral right to exercise the degree of reproductive control and self-determination that is biologically and technically possible, by virtue of a political and legal system, resulting in *reproductive injustice*. And it is yet another thing, when an individual third person claims a right to control another individual’s reproductive life directly, in their place, regardless of their will and wellbeing. I will call that *reproductive abuse*.

2. Prevalence of Reproductive Abuse in the Context of CSA in the Catholic Church

2.1. Most Victims Are Adults

As a matter of statistical probability, most victims of reproductive abuse at the hands of Catholic clergy are adults. On the one hand, most of the fertile years of a person’s life—and thus the years of life in which a person is most at risk of experiencing reproductive abuse—are beyond the age of majority (Nichols et al. 2006). On the other hand, clerical sexual misconduct mostly involves adults. The John Jay Report on the “Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors” (Terry et al. 2011) states that most sexual behavior of priests concerns adults. Richard Sipe estimates that “four times as many priests involve themselves sexually with adult women, and twice the number with adult men, as priests who involve themselves sexually with children” (Sipe 1994, p. 134).

Unfortunately, numbers, case studies and sources on sexual abuse of adults at the hands of Catholic clergy are still relatively scarce (Chibnall et al. 1998; Sands 2003; De Weger and Death 2017; Reisinger 2018; Haslbeck et al. 2020), whereas research on CSA involving minors has boomed recently, producing a wide range of numbers and data that include evidence on cases of reproductive abuse. For this reason, this study must limit itself to cases involving minors, but there is no doubt that these cases can still shed light on dynamics that will certainly be the same or very similar in cases involving adult victims.

2.2. Number of Minors Affected Is Likely in the Five-Digit Range

While some of the minors who experienced reproductive abuse in the context of CSA in the Catholic Church are boys², in all likelihood, it is adolescent girls who are most affected. Regarding the number of girls sexually abused by Catholic priests, the percentage of female victims varies from 16.5% (Deetman et al. 2011) to 35.4% (McClellan et al. 2017). In one representative study, participants who reported CSA in the Catholic Church even were “mostly female” (Witt et al. 2019, p. 9). On average, about one-third of all minor clerical abuse victims are female and about one-third of them are post-pubescent.

Of the offenses examined by the German MHG study, 34.9% involved girls, of whom one-third were older than 13 when they were first sexually assaulted (Dreßing et al. 2019). According to Witt et al., 6% of female victims of Catholic priests reported penetration of the vagina/anus. And according to the John Jay study, 11.9% of female victims alleged penile penetration.³ On the basis of these numbers, a first tentative estimate could be that approximately between 1% and 10% of all minor victims of CSA may also be victims of reproductive abuse.

If we assume this percentage, the total number of underage victims of reproductive abuse at the hands Catholic clergy is probably at least in the four-digit range in countries with a population between 70 and 80 million (Witt et al. 2019; *Rapport de la Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l’Église: Les violences sexuelles dans l’Église catholique, France 1950–2020 2021*), and possibly in the five-digit range in a country such as the US, which has a much larger population. The total number of adult victims of reproductive abuse at the hands of Catholic clergy is possibly four times as high. These are, of course, nothing but estimative approximations. For more substantially reliable statements, targeted surveys are needed.

2.3. Archival Evidence

Another indication of the relatively high prevalence of reproductive abuse in the context of CSA is the frequency with which it appears in archival material. Hardly any of the studies on abuse in the Catholic Church that have been conducted so far on the basis of archival material specifically address or systematically examine reproductive abuse. Generally, pregnancies of victims as a result of the abuse are hardly mentioned in them. Unfortunately, the publicly available archival and data material is also limited. This study is therefore confined to documents from the world’s largest independent archive on clerical child abuse in the Catholic Church in the United States (BishopAccountability.org). All of the cases examined below are drawn from this context. The study therefore reveals only a small part of the problem. However, it can be justifiably assumed that there are similar cases all over the world.

A simple search of the only partially digitized records of BA’s archive for the keywords “pregnancy” and “abortion” yields dozens of cases. Even when restricted to only those allegations of reproductive abuse, in which, besides the particular incident and the year it occurred, also the name, incardination and age of the respective perpetrator as well as the age of the victim can be specified, and the victim being underage at the time she was first abused, the number of finds is still remarkably high (see Table 1).

Most of the priests involved in these cases are confirmed serial abusers of girls. In many cases, there are indications of further pregnancies or abortions, most of which cannot, however, be sufficiently traced on the basis of the available material and, therefore, are not included in this table or study.

Table 1. Reproductive abuse cases documented in Bishop Accountability’s archives.

Type	Age of Perpetrator at Time Abuse Began	Age of Victim at Time Abuse Began	Age of Victim at Incident	Year Abuse Began	Year of Incident	Incardination/State
insemination (not leading to a lasting pregnancy)	32	16	17	1958	1958	Boston MA
	30	15	25	1972	1982	Minneapolis MN
	40	9	13	1990	1994	El Paso TX
pregnancy ending in abortion	40	16	16	1960	1960	SJ */Buffalo NY
	26	12	22	1952	1962	Burlington VT
	33	13	16	1963	1966	Covington KY
	38	16	16	1967	1967	SJ */Fairbanks AK
	33	10	13	1969	1973	Philadelphia PA
	36	15	18	1970	1973	Belleville IL
	48	15	18	1973	1976	Santa Fe NM
	34	14	14	1977	1977	Santa Rosa CA
	47	13	16	1975	1978	SJ */Fairbanks AK
	32	14	16	1978	1980	Orange CA
	30	11	14	1980	1983	El Paso TX
43	13	17	1980	1985	Scranton PA	
pregnancy ending in childbirth	27	17	18	1956	1957	Greensburg PA
	28	16	17	1965	1966	Cincinnati OH
	32	16	19	1973	1977	AA */New York NY
	29	17	18	1978	1979	Phoenix AZ
	53	14	15	1981	1983	OMI */Galveston-Houston TX
	46	17	18	1987	1988	Scranton PA
	47	17	18	1988	1989	Scranton PA
	30	15	16	1988	1989	Bridgeport CT
32	17	18	1997	1998	Los Angeles CA	

*SJ = Jesuits, AA = Assumptionists, OMI = Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

3. Types of Reproductive Abuse

3.1. Indifference

Reproductive indifference can be defined as: *undermining another person’s reproductive self-determination through carelessness.*⁴ Sexual perpetrators who are guilty of this kind of indifference do not necessarily want to hurt or exploit the reproductive life of their victims—they simply do not bother to protect it. When they vaginally penetrate their victims while not using a reliable form of birth control, they risk impregnating them.

In most sources on cases that involve sexually abusive priests, references to forms of birth control are rare. Sometimes there are hints that priests used condoms or even had a vasectomy. However, in cases that eventually ended in pregnancies, the preferred birth control method of priests, if there was one at all, seems to have been withdrawal. When a girl named Rita Milla is asked by Los Angeles auxiliary bishop, John J. Ward, how she knew who of the priests abusing her was the father of her child, she replied among other things that one of them “withdrew himself prior to ejaculation saying that he knew how to protect himself” (Ward 1984, p. 37). Another case involves a girl who had been sexually abused by Father Miguel Luna, a priest in the diocese of El Paso. He abused her from age 9 and repeatedly vaginally penetrated her from age 12 to 17 in the 1990s. In a criminal trial, she describes how Luna used to pull out and come in his hand. But when she is asked if there was a time that he ejaculated inside of her, she replies that he did, and “more than once” (Reporter’s Record 2019a, p. 111). She goes on to describe a particular instance, when she was 13 years old: “He goes no—he told me this in Spanish, he goes check yourself because if you become pregnant—he told me you can’t have it because it wouldn’t make me look—meaning him—look good in the eyes of the church” (Reporter’s Record 2019a, p. 112).⁵ She further states that she did not become pregnant, but had been extremely concerned she would. Other victims of Miguel Luna had been less lucky.

For victims, the mere fear of being pregnant and the accompanying uncertainty, that often lasts over a period of weeks, can be extremely stressful. In one case, a teenager had been abused by Father Gerard E. Creighton from age 16. She wanted to become a nun and

Creighton abused her until shortly before she entered a convent, when she was 17 in 1958. In a letter, her attorney states years later: “As a result of this abuse, [name redacted] entered the convent grieving and broken in spirit, seized in emotional pain and grief. She felt as though the shame of her deeds was transparent and visible. She was terrified that she was pregnant” (Orenstein 1998, p. 436).

Even if it turns out that the victim is not pregnant after all, the fear of being in that state can lead to decisions that change their life course dramatically, such as dropping out of education. In a memo from July 26, 1977, the Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Francis J. Statkus, records a conversation he had with a woman and her daughter. The girl had just graduated high school and enrolled in college, together with a friend. She wanted to talk to the chancellor on behalf of that friend who had confided in her that she “had sex” with Father Nicholas Cudemo, feared she might be pregnant and had dropped out of college. Referring to the fear of pregnancy, Statkus drily notes: “However, that condition does not exist from the latest information” (Statkus 1977, p. 15).

3.2. Coercion

Reproductive coercion can be defined as: *overriding the reproductive autonomy of another person in order to assert one’s own needs at their expense*. Catholic priests who impregnated their victims usually put their own reputation above the victim’s bodily autonomy and health and sometimes even above the life of their victim and their (unborn) child. They try to end or conceal the pregnancy, at any cost, and regardless of the will and needs of the pregnant person.

3.2.1. Abortions

Judging from the available archival material, the immediate reaction of most clerical perpetrators who learn about their victims’ pregnancy is to persuade them to have an abortion. Many of the priests are actively “assisting” in the procedure by paying for the abortion or by bringing their victims to an abortion facility.

In many cases, it is evident that the abortion serves above all the priest’s reputation. An unusually plain statement of this priority may be found in the case of Luna, who allegedly told one of his victims she could not keep the child because it would not make him “look good in the eyes of the church” (Reporter’s Record 2019a, p. 112). However, in almost all cases, it is clear that the protection of a priest’s reputation is the main driving motivation, and often the only motivation, for the abortion. In some cases, were they not so abhorrent, one could say that this reaches almost satirical dimensions: When one of Nicholas Cudemo’s victims, named “Ruth” by the Philadelphia Grand Jury Report, was testifying before the Grand Jury, not only did she recall how “Cudemo took her for an abortion of a fetus she conceived from his rapes sometime before she started high school in 1973”, but she also remembered that in doing so “he was mad because he was ‘very pro-life’” (Philadelphia Grand Jury Report 2003, p. 130).

In order to protect his reputation, the Jesuit James Poole did not only drive one of his victims to an abortion but, on top of that, even to a false accusation. Poole had an extraordinarily long history of sexually abusing girls, most of it taking place in Alaska. Among the Alaskan girls he abused was Rachel Mike. Her family was poor and starving. Her parents being alcoholics, she suffered the same addiction, and in addition to that, she was suicidal at a young age. She was 14 turning 15 when Poole sexually abused her. In February 1978, she realized she was pregnant because of this abuse. An abortion could not be carried out without her parents’ consent. Decades later, she described in a videotaped deposition how Poole convinced her to blame her own father for the abuse in order to divert suspicion from himself and convince her mother to tacitly sign the abortion papers: “the way Father Poole was trying to tell me what to say—what to, you know, say about my dad, what, you know, what he done to me even though he never did nothing to me, put him down to make Father Poole look good and out of the way.” She also talks about her own inability to stand up to this lie: “I was like brainwashed by Father Poole not to say

anything, that I can't say nothing. He probably look at me as a dumb little Eskimo girl that can't say nothing because I was scared" ([Superior Court of the State of Alaska 2005](#), p. 89). So, she said, she told everybody involved that her father had raped and impregnated her, including her own mother, who signed the papers for the abortion ([Superior Court of the State of Alaska 2005](#), p. 73).

In the pre-Roe era in the US, abortions were illegal and often life-threatening procedures. In that period, some perpetrators went so far as to take their victim to another country, where abortions were legal at the time. One example of this is Joseph A. Browne, called "Jay". In 1963, the 32-year-old priest became a counselor at an orphanage in Fort Mitchel, Kentucky. According to a lawsuit brought forth in 2003, Browne made contact with a 13-year-old girl living at the home. He bought her alcohol and he began to abuse her. At some point, the girl realized she was pregnant and "Father Brown arranged for an abortion". He took her to an unnamed country where the abortion was performed ([Associated Press State & Local Wire 2003](#)).

Other victims underwent illegal abortions in the US and only narrowly escaped death. One of them is a woman who was allegedly raped by the Jesuit Vincent P. Mooney, then rector at Canisius high school in Buffalo NY, when she was 16 in the late 1950s. Some time after the rape, she discovered she was pregnant. In an interview, she later remembers: "The shame was immense." She had to tell her mother, who insisted that she needed to have an abortion. It became a life-threatening intervention: "I hemorrhaged, I started bleeding out and it almost killed me" ([Specht 2019](#)). She only survived, she said, because she was transferred to a hospital where a doctor managed to save her life.

In the 1950s in a parish in the diocese of Burlington VT, a priest named Benjamin Wysolmerski began to abuse a 12-year-old girl. Decades later, in April 1991, she wrote to the diocese to report this abuse. And some weeks later, on April 30, 1991, she sent another long letter to the diocese—this second letter was addressed to Wysolmerski. In it she describes the sexual abuse she suffered, the effects it had on her life and she also mentions an abortion: "I am hurting because you paid for my abortion in 1962—a priest paying to destroy two people! (. . .) I am hurting because of that abortion. I am hurting because I nearly bled to death on a dingy mattress in a rooming house in Weston, Vermont, because of that abortion—paid for by you. In those days abortions were not only illegal, they were life-threatening. The coat hanger did not hurt nearly as much as my soul. For three days I laid in a pool of my own blood with no one to take care of me, and you had the nerve to call me a whore. Two people died when that baby was aborted, 'Father,' the child to be and me" ([Name Redacted 1991](#), p. 152).

Even after *Roe v. Wade*, when abortions in the US were legal and medically safe, for victims of sexual and reproductive abuse, they often were still traumatic. Most of them were exposed to risk factors such as "perceived pressure from others to terminate a pregnancy", "lack of perceived social support from others" or "feelings of stigma" ([Reardon 2018](#)). Living in a Catholic community where they were sexually abused and, on top of that, exposed to involuntary insemination by a Catholic priest, followed by the discovery of having been impregnated, and ending up either being actively coerced into having an abortion or being effectively without anything that resembled a free choice, for many of the affected women and girls, the abortion turned out to be another traumatic experience on top of previous others. One of the girls who had an abortion and said she suffered from depression as a consequence is Susan Martinez-Sandoval. She had been abused as a high school student in Albuquerque from the age of 15 by a priest called Robert Kirsch in the 1970s. When she became pregnant after years of abuse, she had an abortion and after that "felt traumatized about the abortion (. . .) very depressed and thought of suicide", according to the court's Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law ([Second Judicial District Court County of Bernalillo 1993](#), p. 2174).

In other cases, it appears as if victims chose to have an abortion, seemingly without external pressure, while the actual pressure they were under, generated by the perpetrator's callousness and the victims' living conditions, could not in fact be worse. In 2019, another

victim of Luna testified in the already mentioned criminal trial in Texas. She said she had been first abused by him when she was 11, in 1980, and had had an abortion at age 14. In her court hearing, she describes how Luna reacted when she told him that she thought she was pregnant: “A. He had asked me what I was going to do. Q. And what did you tell him? A. I told him I wasn’t going to have the baby and he told me just to have the baby and I could give it to him. Q. And what did you say to that? A. I told him that if I was going to have this baby, I was going to keep it. Q. Did you say anything else? A. I told him I wouldn’t put that child through the humiliation of knowing that it was conceived by rape and by a priest” ([Reporter’s Record 2019b](#), p. 70). She, too, felt traumatized by the abortion. She said she still felt guilty and had never forgiven herself, and that she speaks to the baby she lost, even now three decades later “all the time” ([Reporter’s Record 2019c](#), p. 83).

Sometimes, the pressure to abort does not appear to be the main traumatic experience, but more like a kind of crystallization point that brings victims to fully realize their situation. This results in a shock, especially when victims had been made to believe they were in a “relationship”. Among others, this is described by Lori Haigh, who was sexually abused by Father John Peter Lenihan from age 14 to 17 in a parish in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. She had long believed the priest, who was twice her age, to be her “first love”. But when she eventually became pregnant in 1980, he insisted she should have an abortion. The Los Angeles Times reported on this case in 2002 and quoted a former friend and classmate of Lori Haigh, Shannon Moser, who remembered “Haigh in tears, talking on the phone in a mutual friend’s bedroom. When Moser asked another friend what was wrong, she was told that Father John had gotten Haigh pregnant and was telling her to get an abortion. Moser didn’t believe the story until Haigh held up the phone and she recognized Lenihan’s distinctive Irish brogue” ([Lobdell 2002b](#)). More than twenty years later, the bishop of Orange, in whose diocese Lenihan had been incardinated, apologized to her and the dioceses of Los Angeles and Orange agreed to pay a USD 1.2 million settlement. During a press conference after the settlement, Lori Haigh said she was so desperate back then that she tried to commit suicide, “cutting her wrists with a butcher knife” ([Lobdell 2002a](#)).

3.2.2. Pregnancies and Births under Adverse Conditions

Attempts to pressure victims into abortions did not always succeed. In some cases, victims resisted their perpetrators’ pressure. In other cases, attempted abortions failed. In others again, perpetrators shied away from an abortion, but coerced their pregnant victims into hiding. Documents from such cases shed light on the severe consequences these pregnancies and births had for the girls, young women and babies involved.

An example of how bad conditions of giving birth can be when victims of reproductive abuse are coerced into hiding is the already mentioned case of Rita Milla. She was 16 years old in 1980, when a priest working for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Santiago L. Tamayo, began to abuse her and introduced her to other abusers. She ended up being abused by a group of seven priests. In 1982, she discovered that she was pregnant and later claimed that one of the priests told her to have an abortion (in a memo to Cardinal Manning from 1984, Tamayo is said to deny this allegation; [Rawden 1984](#)), but she refused. In order to keep the pregnancy a secret, Tamayo sent Rita to the Philippines seven months before her due date. Her parents, who were unaware of their daughter’s pregnancy, were made to believe she was there for a study visit. The plan was for her to deliver the baby and leave it in the Philippines.

However, Rita received too little money from Tamayo to feed herself and got stuck in awful conditions. Scared of what might happen to her, she wrote a letter to Tamayo that she never sent, but kept and later presented at the Los Angeles Superior Court in October 1987: “I’m close to falling in a state of depression. There are times that I cry all day without any reason (. . .) And you better start doing something to help me or else I’m going home. And for the baby’s own safety I’m going by August. I don’t have to put up with your shit any longer. I’m here because hell will be raised with you when people find out how I got pregnant. But if you won’t help me then I won’t help you. You just better have a good

explanation to give to my parents before they see me 7 months pregnant. I really don't want to do it that way but you leave me no choice. I refuse to stay here where so many things can go wrong. And if something does go wrong it will still be hell for you. Imagine explaining to my mother that I died during childbirth. Don't think it's an exaggeration" (Milla 1983, spelling as in the original).

Rita did not leave the Philippines. She stayed, gave birth to a daughter and took her back to the United States. Later, she filed a suit that named the seven priests and the Archdiocese as defendants. Gloria Allred was her attorney. An outside lawyer named John P. McNicholas, hired by Cardinal Mahony, followed the trial. In an internal communication about the court case, McNicholas summarizes what had been said about Rita's situation, as she was approaching her due date: "She described a very difficult pregnancy and delivery. (. . .) She received inadequate care. (. . .) She did not receive regular checkups, had only one urine test, her weight and blood pressure were rarely taken, she lost weight (approximately 20 pounds by her fifth month) and suffered from extreme dehydration. She threw up during her entire pregnancy. Sometimes she threw up blood. She had headaches and occasionally saw spots and sometimes felt like she was passing out. (. . .) On October 12, 1982 [Rita, name redacted in the document] was taken by C-Section at Provincial Hospital in Laoag City by Dr. [redacted]. [Rita, name redacted in the document] had gone into a coma from eclampsia" (McNicholas 1987, p. 149).

When teenagers give birth, this has usually a heavy and long-lasting impact on their life and future, including physical and mental risks associated with teenage pregnancies, as well as social risks for themselves and their children. This can be seen, among many others, in the case of a young woman, who was first abused by Father Joseph DeShan, a priest in the diocese of Bridgeport, when she was 15 years old. In September 1989, two months after her 16th birthday, she became pregnant and eventually gave birth to a child that she raised on her own. She had dreamed of going to college and had wanted to become a police officer or join the military, all of which seemed utterly impossible now. When she came forward about ten years later, aged 28, she said in an interview: "I'm angry (. . .) I feel anger because I got pregnant, because I haven't done anything in life that I wanted to do" (Rich 2002).

Not only the young mothers, but also the children born and raised under these circumstances mostly face a gloomy future. This is tangible in a case of two women in Alaska, who came forward in October 2005, and claimed that a Jesuit named James E. Jacobsen had sexually assaulted and impregnated them in the 1960s. They gave birth to his sons. The women and children suffered from social and emotional distress. One "child was born in August 1966 and in his early years thought his mother's husband was his father. But rumors and teasing about the possibility the priest was his father dogged him" (Demer 2005). One of the women said she suffered "emotional distress, loss of self esteem, disgrace, humiliation and lost affection from her husband". The children "grew up without knowing their biological father, without child support and without his support and guidance" (Demer 2005).

Priests who father children not infrequently refuse to pay child support, forcing their victims to fight for years and even decades. When a woman in Arizona, named Sharon Roy, became pregnant by Father Patrick J. Colleary, who had allegedly raped her in 1978 when she was 17, he told her "to have the baby adopted, or get an abortion". But she kept the child and raised it. When she asked for financial support for the child, Colleary and the diocese refused. She came back in 1994, asking the diocese for help in supporting her child. But the diocese refused to supply child support, while it kept the child's father on the diocese's payroll, despite "continued complaints of abominable sexual behavior". It was only in 1995, when Roy filed for child support with the Department of Economic Security's Child Support Enforcement Administration in Phoenix, that the Diocese "quietly garnished \$400 a month from Colleary's wages" to support his child. In an interview with the Phoenix New Times in 2002, Roy said: "It is awful dealing with them. They intimidate you to the nth degree, make you feel like you're the bad person" (Nelson 2002).

3.2.3. Coerced Adoption

Another way to cover up priestly fatherhood is to persuade the mother to give the child up for adoption. Coerced adoption in the Catholic context is mostly associated with Irish Mother and Baby Homes ([Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes 2021](#)). But during the Post World War II period, in the so-called Baby Scoop Era, it seems to have been fairly common in the United States as well. Single, middle-class teenagers and women, who either could not or would not marry the man who impregnated them, had few other options than so-called maternity homes. These homes are described by Marcia A. Ellison as “total institutions where neurotic pregnancies could be cured by separating single mothers from their children” ([Ellison 2003](#), p. 326).

In the context of CSA, coerced adoptions very likely went along with other forms of abuse. Besides sexual abuse and sexual trauma, they may involve many or even all of the above mentioned forms of reproductive abuse, such as coerced insemination, attempted coerced abortion, hiding and giving birth in traumatic or life-threatening circumstances, and even compulsion to lie in order to protect the reputation of the perpetrator.

There is one example in the diocese of Manchester NH. In the winter of 1948/1949, a priest named John Thomas Sullivan showed particular concern for a poor girl who had no parents. He found her a job, monitored her bank account, and secured her an apartment. An account of what happened then is given in a heavily redacted document that is entitled “Custody” and in all likelihood was part of an application for guardianship that the diocese filed on behalf of the girl: “residents in the building report that there had been a close association between Father Sullivan and [name redacted]. During the third week in June, [name redacted] nauseated daily in the morning and was given assistance by residents of the building and on 6/26/49 was hospitalized at the Claremont Hospital (. . .) as a result of an abortion attempt. She was two months pregnant and had not miscarried. She was in great pain and (. . .) was admitted under an assumed name (. . .)” ([Document Entitled Custody 1949](#), p. 212). According to this same document “Father Sullivan (. . .) has in his possession an affidavit signed by [name redacted] on 7/2/49 and witnessed by Father Hubert Mann absolving Father Sullivan. A statement from it reads: ‘Father Sullivan had nothing to do with the condition in which I was and he did not counsel the abortion’” ([Document Entitled Custody 1949](#), p. 212).

However, other sources in the same file make it clear that he had, in fact, a great deal to do with it: On December 14, 1949, Jeanette H. Melton, Executive Secretary of The New Hampshire’s Children’s Aid Society, informs Michael J. Hurley, the Chancellor of the diocese of Manchester, that the petition for guardianship was granted and that the girl had been “admitted to the Florence Crittenton Home on 10-14-49 and on 10-27-49 was delivered of a premature baby, [redacted] weighing 2 pounds 4 1/2 ounces. Both [redacted] and the baby were in serious condition (. . .) for some time it seemed unlikely that the baby would survive” ([Melton 1949](#)). On January 16, 1950, Mrs. Melton writes again informing the Chancellor that the baby was “gaining rapidly. We hope to get word soon that he can leave the hospital. It distresses us that these costs are so high” ([Melton 1950a](#)). On February 24, she writes to the Chancellor to ask a question that relates to Father Sullivan: “Will it be possible for you to obtain the information about the father which we shall need if we make adoption plans?” She remarks: “The baby is thought to resemble the father strongly.” And admits: “At this point the mother is not ready to surrender the baby for adoption, but we are anxious to make progress in collecting information bearing on adoptability” ([Melton 1950b](#)). Finally, in a letter dated September 15, 1950, Melton informs Hurly that the child whom she describes as “a solemn, distant baby”, “went to an adoption home on September 7” ([Melton 1950c](#)).

As for Sullivan, he was suspended twice in less than ten years for the same reason. When he sought admittance into other dioceses, the bishop of Manchester, Matthew F. Brady, sat down in late 1957 and wrote no less than a dozen letters in which he warned bishops of neighboring dioceses: “I feel that every inquiring Bishop should know some of the circumstances that range from parenthood, through violation of the Mann Act,

attempted suicide and abortion (. . .) a new diocese would only mean new pastures” (Brady 1957).

There is another case of coerced adoption around 15 years later and 900 miles west of Manchester. According to a lawsuit filed by a woman in 2004, she was sexually abused as a 16-year-old high school student in 1965 by Father Norman L. Heil, a priest incardinated in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. When she became pregnant, Church officials made her leave high school and move to a private Catholic institution for pregnant teens. She was warned not to reveal the name of the child’s father “under any condition”. Additionally, she was massively worked on and put under pressure, to give the child up for adoption. She did not want to do that, but Father Heil and an unnamed religious Sister insisted. Allegedly, the nun warned her “the Church would not baptize her child unless she put the baby up for adoption” (Horn 2004). She finally gave in. In 2004, almost forty years later her lawyer, Marc Mezibov, stated that “his client recently spoke to her daughter for the first time and may meet with her” (Horn 2004).

3.3. Violence

Reproductive violence can be defined as: *using the reproductive vulnerability of a person to torture or intimidate them into submission*. In contrast to *indifference* and *coercion*, the violence of the act is fully obvious and this is intended by the perpetrator. This form of reproductive abuse is mostly witnessed in the context of war crimes (UN Secretary-General 2018), and occasionally in intimate partner violence (Moore et al. 2010; Coyle et al. 2015), but it also occurs in the context of CSA.

In 1970, Father Raymond F. Kownacki was assigned to a parish in St. Francisville in Illinois. Among his parishioners was a devout family with nine children, one of them a 15-year-old girl named Gina. Father Kownacki employed her to clean the rectory. According to a complaint filed by Gina in 1995, one time when she vacuumed his bedroom in the fall of 1970, he raped her for the first time. “Father Kownacki then advised Gina that he loved her and that he needed her love, that she should trust him.” When he was transferred to another parish 50 miles west, he “provided financial assistance” to her parents and convinced them that Gina needed a better education, which she could get in the high school in his new parish. In the summer of 1971, Gina moved to Kownacki’s new rectory, where she, then aged 16, was expected to do the housekeeping, cooking and laundry, all while attending high school. Kownacki continued to abuse her sexually.

In December 1971, Gina met a boy, whom she began to date. She fell in love with him and in January 1973 decided to have intercourse with him for she “wanted to experience sex with someone she cared about rather than someone who disgusted her”. After some time, Gina realized that she was pregnant. Since Kownacki had told her he had a vasectomy, she believed her boyfriend to be the father. She met the boy who “took her to a doctor who confirmed the pregnancy. He then promised to marry Gina and care for her and their baby”.

When Gina told Kownacki that she was pregnant from her boyfriend and going to marry him, Kownacki “flew into a rage”. He began to beat her and “screamed at her that if he could not have her no one would”. He said, “there was no way she could have a baby.” Then, he made her drink “a potion that he had mixed which he told her was a guinine mixture used in Central America to abort babies”. After drinking it, Gina began feeling very tired and laid down. Kownacki then removed her slacks and underpants, “inserted his entire hand into Gina’s vagina and wrenched and squeezed her uterus. Gina passed out.” When she woke up, she found herself lying in a pool of blood. She got up and got home and shortly after, miscarried. She was taken to a hospital in Mt. Carmel, Illinois, where she was “informed that if she had not been brought into the hospital when she was, she would not have lived” (Complaint at Law, Gina Trimble Parks and Douglas Parks vs. Reverend Raymond Kownacki and the Catholic Diocese of Belleville, in the circuit court St. Clair County, Civil File No. 95L308, Illinois 1995).

4. Analysis: Layers of Misogyny

After the establishment of basic definitions of various forms of reproductive abuse in the first part of the paper, the biggest challenge that remains is to adequately understand the phenomenon in its specific context. A proper analysis will have to explain why reproductive abuse in the Catholic context has been all but invisible so far, and why there has been so little action or even research on it, despite the particularly high value that is placed on reproductive issues in Catholic doctrine.

One possible explanatory model might be the redoubled impact of misogyny in this particular context. Reproductive abuse is closely linked to a patriarchal, sexist and misogynistic logic that is widely accepted and normalized in the secular sphere as well as in the Catholic Church. This logic assigns a subordinate place to women and girls in relation to men and distributes rights and obligations unequally between the sexes (Manne 2017; Manne 2020). In this logic, female sexuality and reproductivity are subordinated to male interests and, in some cases, this can mean that a man's sexual needs or reputation are given greater weight than the dignity, health and even the life of a woman, adolescent girl or a baby. According to this logic, girls' and women's reproductive vulnerability does not result in more rights, but in more obligations for them. Consequently, women's reproductive vulnerability and their reproductive abuse are at most invisible and irrelevant to the law makers' eyes, and in case they surface at all, they are easily considered women's very own liability. In a nutshell: A system of *reproductive injustice* enables and obscures *reproductive abuse*, and this happens *simultaneously* in secular society and in the Catholic Church. It is this mutual interpenetration of religious and secular misogyny that works like a stealth mechanism for reproductive abuse committed by Catholic priests.

As far as misogyny, reproductive violence, injustice and abuse in the secular context are concerned, I refer to works by Altunjan, Buller and Schulte, Chrisler, Cook, Duggan and Jacobson, Manne, Moore and Ross. In what follows, I limit myself to some basic observations about reproductive injustice in the Catholic Church.

4.1. Reproductive Injustice in the Catholic Church

Catholic women live in a double subordination to Catholic priests: as women, they are subordinate to men, and as lay people, they are subordinate to clergy. On top of this double gender hierarchy, there is an extreme power imbalance between those who hold reproductive power in the Catholic Church and those who are particularly reproductively vulnerable.

4.1.1. Exclusion of Reproductively Active Persons from Government and Legislation

Unlike any other international religious entity, organization or state, in the Roman Catholic Church, only permanently celibate men meet the requirement to become members of the clergy, and occupy leadership positions (cc. 1024 i.c.w. c. 129 § 1, cc. 1041, 1042 CIC 1983). Only they can be ordained as priests and can exert jurisdiction (*potestas regiminis*). All legislation, jurisprudence and administration are tied back to the clergy. This means whoever can become pregnant and whoever is or plans to be reproductively active are excluded by definition from government and legislation in their Church. As a consequence, the group of people who set the rules for the reproductive life of Catholics, and the group of Catholics who can become pregnant or are married to a person who can become pregnant, are as neatly separated as they can be. In addition, these two groups—clergy and lay people—are in a clear relationship of superiority and subordination according to the Church's constitution, which demands strict obedience and accountability from the bottom up (cc. 212 § 1, 273 CIC 1983), but only moral responsibility from the top down.

4.1.2. Increasing Importance of Reproductive Issues in Catholic Doctrine

From the beginning of the 20th century, it has been of increasing importance to the celibate male leaders of the Church to create and enforce rules for the reproductive behavior of Catholics. The importance of the "question of human procreation" not only

in the Catholic moral system but also in the political action of the Holy See can hardly be overestimated (Radford Ruether 2008; Beattie 2014). Various popes have placed this issue at the heart of major teaching and legal documents. They give precise guidelines about who may perform an act which is “suitable in itself for the procreation of offspring” with whom, when and how. The most prominent among these documents are Pope Pius XI (1930), Pope Paul VI (1968), and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1987). They regulate in painstaking detail which methods of birth control and which forms of intercourse and insemination are permissible. Summarizing this teaching, only heterosexual spouses are allowed to have sexual intercourse. Any sexual act must be open to the transmission of new life. Any sexual act outside of marriage, and any form of so-called artificial contraception and especially abortion, are considered a grave sin.

These texts suggest that reproductive abuse would be harshly punished in the Catholic Church. But that is not the case. Partly because the very concepts of reproductive autonomy and reproductive abuse are alien to the logic of these documents. Partly because the much-invoked dignity of mothers and the sacredness of unborn life as presented in Catholic doctrine do not result in guaranteed and enforceable canonical rights for mothers and children. Not least, decisions as to whether and who is prosecuted and punished for an illegitimate pregnancy or for an abortion, and who is absolved and on what grounds, are ultimately reserved to male clergy. In cases of reproductive abuse, all of these factors work to the disadvantage of victims, as can be seen in exemplary cases.

4.2. *Misogynistic Mechanisms in Dealing with Reproductive Abuse*

4.2.1. Burden Shifting

In theory, the strict teaching on reproduction applies equally to all members of the Church. One could even say that it especially applies to priests, because they are not even allowed to be reproductively active. In practice, however, there are incentives for priests who do not want to carry the burden of celibacy to put it on the women and girls they impregnated and on the children they fathered. For in the logic of canon law, a violation of celibacy mostly remains a personal matter of conscience for a priest as long as it does not become a public *scandal*. For if “the act is not known to others (and therefore, ipso facto is not scandalous), these facts weigh against imposing any canonically penal consequences” (Kochansky and Herrmann 2004). That means, as long as a priest hides his fatherhood, it usually has little consequences for him. Hence, the common urge felt by priests to conceal pregnancies they caused at all costs, which results in all the more drastic implications for the involved woman or girl and (unborn) child.

Even though, in some places, there may be particular canonical rules for alimony payments that must be paid for priests’ (secret) children, these regulations are usually not made publicly known and, on top of that, are not reliably implemented. Sometimes, priests who impregnated girls even receive extra help from their superiors to avoid child support, as in Rita Milla’s case. When she came to the chancery office on July 19, 1983 and said she “wanted the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to force Father Tugade to assume his responsibilities”, she was told that he was not “now assigned in this jurisdiction but had moved in January of 1983 to Monterey, California, under the jurisdiction of Bishop Thadeus Shubsda” (Ward 1984, p. 36). She was not told, however, that it was the Archdiocese that had suggested to all seven priests who had abused Rita “that they leave their assignments until such time as publicity and the trial have subsided (. . .) with the knowledge of His Eminence, Cardinal Manning”, according to an archdiocesan document dated May 3, 1984 (Archdiocese of Los Angeles 1984, p. 28).

Not only is the burden of financial responsibility for priests’ children routinely handed over to the victims of reproductive abuse, even the burden of sin is. Lori Haigh recalls how Father Lenihan drove her to the bank: “He gave me the money and said, of course, that he couldn’t come with me for the abortion”, which is a grave sin. However, he “didn’t seem particularly concerned about the status of my soul,” she said (Lobdell 2002a).

Not only clerical perpetrators, but also parents and family leave pregnant women and even girls alone and literally chase them away. Among others, this was experienced by Nilda Lopez, who had been first abused when she was 16 years old in 1973 by Father Louis J. Rios in the Archdiocese of New York. Rios began to abuse her after she had confided in him that her father was abusive. Eventually, she discovered that she was pregnant. In an interview, she recalls how Rios offered her money “from the church collection plate” and told her to have an abortion. But she decided not to have an abortion, even though her own family disowned her: “It was real hard. I had to lie to get welfare. My father threw me out of the house because I wouldn’t tell him who the baby’s father was” (Saul 2004).

4.2.2. Dismissal

Notwithstanding all Church rhetoric about the dignity of mothers and the sanctity of unborn life, the often immense burden, pain, responsibility and suffering of pregnant teenagers and women who undergo reproductive abuse at the hands of Catholic priests are usually outright ignored and dismissed by members of the clergy.

Rejection can be carried out in a spontaneous yet bureaucratic manner. Like in the already mentioned memo by Chancellor Francis Statkus, who limited himself to noting that a pregnancy did “not exist from the latest information” (Statkus 1977, p. 15), but saw no reason to do anything about the serious consequences that the fear of pregnancy had in the life of the young victim. Other times, dismissal is much more deliberate. An example of this is the case of the Jesuit James Poole. When Rachel Mike came forward in 2004 with an abortion allegation, the provincial superior of the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus, John D. Whitney, immediately knew this allegation was particularly serious. He notes: “The advice to have an abortion would require dismissal from the Society and the clerical state, as it is a *latae sententiae* offense” (Whitney 2004). According to canon law, any person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication *latae sententiae*, that is by the very commission of the offense (c. 2350 §1 CIC 1917, c. 1398 CIC 1983, CCC 1992, p. 2272). There is even a special rule (c. 985 n. 4 CIC 1917, c. 1041 n. 4, c. 1044 §1 n.3 CIC 1983) that applies exclusively to priests: Men who have assisted in the procurement of a completed abortion become irregular, that is, excluded from receiving priestly ordination or irregular for the exercise of orders. This means priests who are found guilty of this offense can no longer perform their priestly duties, unless they are judged worthy of a dispensation. Once their participation in an abortion has become publicly known through court proceedings, the irregularity can only be dispensed by the Apostolic See in Rome (c. 1047 CIC 1983, see Demel 1995). Since this was such a far-reaching matter, instead of investigating the accusation himself or writing to Rome, Whitney decided to do nothing about it. He writes: “While not impossible, this assertion will need further proof.” And under the heading “Actions” he then adds: “Since Poole is already under the strongest restrictions possible within the Society, I cannot do anything further” (Whitney 2004).

Other times, the suffering of pregnant teenage girls is dismissed in an almost random fashion. It may take the form of blatant mockery, as in the case of Rita Milla. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times in 1991, Santiago Tamayo, the priest who was the first to sexually abuse Rita, and who later left the priesthood and apologized for the abuse, recalled how he confronted the other perpetrators after he had learned about Rita’s pregnancy: “I asked them who was the father and they just laughed,” he recalled “they weren’t going to do anything about it” (Morrison 1991a, p. 193). Other times, a teenager left pregnant by a priest is treated as if it were a common and irrelevant matter. An example is the case of a homeless teenager in Houston who became the victim of Anthony Hernandez Gonzalez, a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate, called “Father Tony”. She was 14 years old when he first approached her in 1981. He told her he “was going to go talk to the pope so the pope would actually be the one doing our wedding,” she later recalled (MacCormack 2008). But he never returned from an alleged trip to the Vatican and left the girl he had impregnated alone. When she reached out to Fr. James Ward, a fellow Oblate priest and the pastor of the parish where Gonzalez was assigned, Ward replied: “Fr. Tony gets a lot of

girls pregnant. He is not here" (Doyle 2008). The girl was left to give birth and raise a baby by herself, while Gonzales was transferred to Canada where he met his next victim.

At times, the suffering is dismissed by an intentional distortion of the factual situation. That is the case when perpetrators and their superiors act as if sexual encounters between a female teenager and a Catholic priest twice her age were normal heterosexual "relationships", for whom both "partners" were equally responsible. In almost all cases involving female teenagers, perpetrators use this framing as a grooming strategy. Cudemo's victim "Ruth", who was only 10 when he first abused her, explained to the Philadelphia Grand Jury how he did that: "He would say, 'Well, I really better drive you right home, because if I don't, I'm going to kiss you. (. . .) And you know, kind of like I didn't say anything, and then, you know, he would pull over and kiss me; (. . .) he would always warn me first, which I didn't know at the time, but it was sort of like his way of making me feel responsible" (Philadelphia Grand Jury Report 2003, p. 129). When victims believe themselves to be in a relationship, they not only feel responsible (and guilty) for the abuse, but also, they often have internalized misogynistic ideas about heterosexual relationships. It is not uncommon for female teenagers and young women to perceive unwanted sexual acts and even reproductive coercion as something they have to put up with when they are in a heterosexual relationship (Harned 2005; Wilson and Miller 2016). When Lori Haigh was asked why she couldn't tell her parents about the abuse, she replied that she "was afraid of getting Lenihan in trouble. She thought somehow she was doing a good deed for the church by providing Lenihan a sexual release. She thought 'the needs of many outweighed the needs of me'" (Lobdell 2002a). Even when victims of reproductive abuse comply with unwanted abortions or adoptions, the internalized obligation to protect the priest and the supposed greater importance of his reputation in relation to their own physical and mental wellbeing is usually at least a contributing factor. Rita Milla said in retrospect in reference to the priests who had abused her, "I almost died protecting their reputation" (Morrison 1991c).

Even bishops frame sexual abuse of female teenagers as "relationships", as becomes clear among other things in a letter by bishop James C. Timlin of Scranton, dated September 6, 1988. Timlin had been informed by March 1988 at least that a priest of his diocese, Father Robert J. Bague, had been sexually involved with a high school student. In August 1988, the sister of the girl had reached out to Timlin to inform him that her sister was pregnant. She also informed Timlin that Bague had been sexually involved with at least two other girls. Timlin responded to this by writing: "Father Bague and your sister have a long, difficult road ahead. What has happened is their responsibility and certainly Father Bague will take care of his obligations" (PA Grand Jury Report, p. 812).

The framing of sexual abuse of female teenagers as love affairs is also taken up by secular media. An example is the widely publicized case of Rita Milla who was aged 16 when 44-year-old Tamayo first abused her in 1978. A newspaper article on Rita Milla's case, published in the Los Angeles Times in 1991, presents Rita Milla and Santiago Tamayo as "once priest and parishioner, and for a time lovers" (Morrison 1991b). It is also worth noting that Rita Milla's account was first met with disbelief by the secular public. After she filed the suit in 1984, even friends fell away and relatives did not believe her. That changed only after Tamayo himself stepped forward and corroborated her story.

4.2.3. Victim Blaming

It is not unusual for offenders as well as superiors to turn to victim blaming, insults, threats or retaliation. For example, priests claim they had actually been seduced by their victims. The aforementioned Father Gonzalez, instead of denying the allegations, insisted in his deposition that it was the homeless 14-year-old girl who "initiated their sexual relationship" (MacCormack 2008). And when Cudemo took "Ruth" for an abortion, he "blamed the young girl and questioned how she could be so stupid as to become pregnant" (Philadelphia Grand Jury Report 2003, p. 130). When Norman Heil's victim, a high school student, had been sent to an institution for pregnant teens, the nun who pressured her

into adoption told her “the pregnancy was her fault and she should ‘suffer in silence’”, according to the suit the woman brought in 2004 (Horn 2004). In spring 2002, one day after he was convicted of sexual abuse, Father Don Kimball blamed his victims, saying in a CNN interview that the clerical collar made him attractive to women: “I wasn’t prepared for putting on that uniform, walking out into real life and discovering the number of women who were coming on to me” (Kovner 2002). Kimball was a serial abuser of teenagers as young as 13, at least one of whom, aged 14 at the time, said she had become pregnant and had an abortion arranged for by him.

Sometimes, superiors share in this victim blaming and take action not against the clerical offender but against the victim. On Feb 16, 1984, days after Rita Milla had filed her complaint, Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Juan Alfredo Arzube commented on the case on TV, allegedly reproducing the words of a friend of one of the accused priests: „This girl has had very bad actions even with altar boys. She is a person of bad reputation.” His comment then was included as an exhibit in the trial (Kmex Channel 34 1987). In the case of the teenager in Bridgeport who became pregnant by Father Joseph DeShan shortly after her 16th birthday in 1989, Joseph DeShan was granted a leave of absence by his bishop when he revealed the “relationship” and began a new life as an elementary school teacher in New Jersey, with no record of sexual misconduct. The experience of his victim was quite different. She said that only “two days after she told DeShan she was pregnant (. . .) she was called in to see Monsignor William Scheyd, a top aide to [Bishop Edward Michael] Egan, and was told that she was fired from her evening receptionist’s job at the Bridgeport cathedral. After that, no one from the diocese contacted her or offered assistance, and no law enforcement authorities ever inquired about her sexual relationship with a priest twice her age”. About 13 years later, in a joint statement, the dioceses of Bridgeport and New York claimed they did “not know DeShan had fathered a child until he petitioned for laicization” in 1994, they speculate the girl had been 16, which is the age of consent in Connecticut, and they quote DeShan as saying at the time that he had a “monogamous relationship with a woman” (Rich 2002).

Even family members of victims may engage in victim blaming and threats. In the criminal trial against Miguel Luna, one of his victims recalled how Luna had sexually penetrated her for the first time, when she was 12 in 1993. After that, she said, she confided in her mother. But her mother only looked at her and said, “Just don’t get pregnant because your father will kill you” (Reporter’s Record 2019a, p. 67).

4.2.4. Clericalist Himpathy

The Church’s widespread failure to take responsibility, let alone show compassion toward victims of reproductive abuse, is matched by equally high levels of compassion toward clerical perpetrators. In abortion cases, the enormous discrepancy between top Catholic officials’ indifference towards female suffering and their compassion for clerical perpetrators becomes especially palpable.

It is worth recalling that according to Catholic doctrine, abortion is considered the most heinous crime imaginable, the deliberate killing of an innocent child in the womb (CDF 1974; Pope John Paul II 1995; CCC 1992, pp. 2270–75). Therefore, the Church’s Magisterium is ready to place enormous burdens on girls and women. It forbids even emergency contraception, considered an abortifacient, and makes it “unavailable in most Catholic hospitals, even when this hospital is the only one available in the area and the person requesting emergency contraception is not a Catholic” (Radford Ruether 2008, p. 190). This prohibition is extended even to rape victims in civil conflict zones. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, there is no trace of an official ecclesiastical exemption that would allow emergency contraception in extreme cases, for example to nuns who were gang-raped during the Congo War in the 1960s (Townsend 2016) or for refugee women of Kosovo in the 1990s (Radford Ruether 2008). Girls and women are expected by the Church to accept pregnancies as a result of war rape and carry them to term in the midst of violent conflicts, even at the risk of their own lives. As a result of this uncompromising teaching,

even victims of reproductive abuse feel guilty after an abortion. One of Luna's victims, who had an abortion when she was 14 in 1983, testified in court in 2019: "There's times I cry myself to sleep and I ask this child to forgive me for what I did because it wasn't the baby's fault." And she recalls: "When my children were going through confirmation, they asked us parents to go watch a video that they were going to show the kids and it had to do with abortion. That was probably the hardest thing I've had to do, because it just brought back all the memories." When she was then asked by the Assistant District Attorney if she had forgiven herself, she answered "I don't think so" ([Reporter's Record 2019c](#), pp. 81–82).

However, the factual and legal situation is quite different for priests who participated in abortions. As we have seen, in theory, they are not only automatically excommunicated, but additionally become irregular as a result of the act. However, in practice superiors are reluctant to impose these penalties. Even if they are imposed, an absolution from the excommunication and on top of that a dispensation from the irregularity are easily granted, and the offender can continue his priestly ministry. In the whole process canon law does not require any involvement of the perpetrator's victim.

Probably one of the most revealing cases in this regard is that of bishop James C. Timlin of Scranton and Father Thomas D. Skotek. In 1986, Timlin learned that Skotek had made his 15-year-old victim have an abortion. On 9 October 1986, the bishop wrote a letter to Skotek, who had had to resign as a consequence of the matter and was sent to St. Luke's Institute MD. In the letter, Timlin expresses his sincere sympathy with Skotek, who apparently found it difficult to accept these measures: "This is a very difficult time in your life, and I realize how upset you are. I too share your grief. How I wish it were not necessary to take this step. With the help of God, who never abandons us and who is always near when we need Him, this too will pass away, and all will be able to pick up and go on living. Please be assured that I am most willing to do whatever I can to help" ([PA Grand Jury Report 2018](#), p. 286). Another letter suggests that Timlin kept this promise by personally interceding in Rome for Skotek, so that he could return to active ministry. On 20 January 1989, Timlin wrote to Cardinal Luigi Dadaglio, Major Penitentiary at the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome: "It has come to my attention that a priest of this diocese has been rendered irregular as a result of having assisted in the procurement of a completed abortion. Conscious as I am of the severity of the crime he admits to, I nevertheless judge him worthy of consideration for a dispensation from this irregularity." And as if to excuse him, he adds: "The priest in question undoubtedly acted out of fear and panic. He had impregnated the girl he assisted in procuring the abortion" ([PA Grand Jury Report 2018](#), p. 288). Skotek was "rendered regular" again and returned to priestly ministry. In April 2002, he was removed again from ministry, as required by a new Church policy. Only months later, Timlin publicly cited Skotek "as a good example of why he opposed applying the new policy in all cases".⁶ He said, Skotek had "performed well without complaint" since the "incident" and "many parishioners have expressed support and praise for Skotek" ([Gydish 2002](#)).

5. Conclusions

The main contribution of this paper is to shed light on cases of reproductive abuse in the context of CSA in the Catholic Church, including involuntary insemination and pregnancies, coerced abortions, adoptions, and births under adverse conditions. Reproductive abuse possibly affects between 1 and 10 percent of underage victims of Catholic clergy sex abuse, and significantly more adults. It is statistically relevant and should be included in all studies and surveys of sexual abuse, not least in the Catholic context. Based on the reproductive justice framework and Manne's approach to misogyny, this paper helps to further explore the Catholic Church's handling of these cases. The common disregard for the suffering of victims of reproductive abuse and the routine absolution of clerical offenders may appear paradoxical in the light of Catholic teaching on reproductive issues, but they are the logical consequence of a clericalistic doctrinal and legal system to which not only the concept of reproductive autonomy is alien, but which moreover ignores any but

the male clerical perspective. Therefore, it lacks the logical prerequisites to even understand reproductive abuse as a criminal act to the detriment of individuals, let alone deal with it appropriately.

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Notes

- ¹ In general, pregnancies of victims of CSA are hardly mentioned in studies on CSA in the catholic church. There is only a general remark in the Australian Royal Commission's Report that some survivors alleged they "became pregnant after being sexually abused as children by people in religious ministry such as church elders, religious brothers or priests. In some cases we heard that this led to miscarriage. In other cases we heard that it led to forced adoption, abortion or marriage." (McClellan et al. 2017).
- ² In the Netherlands, there are allegations of forced castrations: "The Dutch parliament has called for an investigation into reports that Catholic clerics ordered castrations of boys in the 1950s in an attempt to cure their homosexuality." (Voice of America 2012) (Vijselaar et al. 2015) and in the US there is an allegation that a nun became pregnant when abusing a minor (Associated Press State & Local Wire 2004; Barry 2004).
- ³ Penile penetration can of course also take place in such a way that it cannot lead to pregnancies, e.g., as penetration of other body parts. Vaginal penetration could have occurred with the finger or objects. Formulations like these and the absence of questions regarding explicitly penile–vaginal penetration and birth control methods make it clear that reproductive abuse and possible pregnancies of victims have not been in the scope of studies on CSA so far.
- ⁴ In this section, I essentially follow the stage model of abuse (negligence, coercion and violence) that I first developed in relation to spiritual abuse (see Reisinger 2019).
- ⁵ The transcript contains an error at this point (it reads "because it would make me look"). I have therefore corrected the quote to match the audio recording of the trial, which clearly says "wouldn't".
- ⁶ With this Timlin refers to the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, a set of procedures established by the US Bishops' Conference in June 2002. It required "that for even a single act of sexual abuse of a minor—past, present, or future—the offending priest or deacon will be permanently removed from ministry" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002, p. 8).

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