

“Holy” Crimes: Sexual Abuse by an Imposter Priest

Ignazio Grattagliano^{1*}, Rosa Scardigno D², Rosalinda Cassibba² and Giuseppe Mininni²

¹Department of Criminology and Forensic Psychiatry, University of Bari, Italy

²Department of Education, Psychology and Communication, University of Bari, Italy

*Corresponding author: Ignazio grattagliano, Department of Criminology and Forensic Psychiatry, University of Bari, Italy, Tel: +39 080 883046; E-mail: ignazio.grattagliano@uniba.it

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Abstract

The paper reports a case of prolonged sexual abuse against five minors perpetrated by an individual passing himself as a catholic clergy member. The case was brought to our attention within an expert investigation. Multiple levels (psychiatric, psychological, forensic, ethno-anthropological and communicative) characterize the dynamics, situations and meanings of the case. Such complexity underlines the need to combine the contribution of experts from different fields who complement each other, in order to achieve a full understanding of the specificity of the case, which stands in the dense network of perturbations caused by a double betrayal of the trust of the basic relationships of human sociality.

Keywords: Forensic science; Sexual abuse; False; Clergyman; Trust; Diatext; Duplicity; Victim

Introduction

Individuals experiencing conditions of vulnerability may become the target of others with specific pathological-criminal traits, who take advantage of their weakness to gain a variety of benefits [1-7]. With this respect, the case that will be described is a clear example. Religion penetrates so deeply and widely in human experience to touch all domains – here included also the criminal ones – ranging from financial speculation to pedophilia, from discrimination to war. In such cases, there are devastating consequences that clash against the expectations of good so badly that this contradiction takes the form of a very serious scandal. Especially those implying a prejudice for infancy, appear to be the most intolerable one, as already established by the notorious Gospel passage: “Whoever causes one of these little ones...” (Matthew 18, 6). In our context, such scandal hits the bi-millenary Institution of the Catholic Church, which has recently attempted to limit the loss of credit caused by the frequent accusations of pedophilia towards clergy members, such as priests and bishops. Although findings are scant, the available data show that the victims of clergy offender are 81% males; in 40% of the cases reported, the victims’ ages range from 11 to 14 years old. The average age difference between the victim and the perpetrator is 20 years. Those who are more at risk for such abuses are young individuals lacking resources and significant others: in other words, of an adult who cares for them and devotes time in care taking them. These victims may be altar boys or choristers, minors who are well integrated in the Mother Church institution and have an idealized representation of their spiritual guides. With respect to the way in which the crime is expressed and the type of abuses, 1/3 of the clergies penetrated their victims, 1/3 forced their victims to oral sex activities; 2,9% of the victims were involved in conversations focusing on sexual topics, eventually with the use of pornographic materials. 9% of the cases involving active touching or requests to be touched, is perpetrated through clothes, while in 15,8% of the cases, priests were involved in self-touching activities

underneath their clothes. In 71% of the cases the abuse was repeated, while it was an occasional episode in the remaining ones [8-10]. Briefly, the scandal of pedophilic clergy members stands in the severe perturbation caused by them being “false priests”, because they abuse of the trust people place in them.

The Case

The case illustrates an even more severe moral perturbation because the criminal acts implied a double abuse against the trust placed by parents and children in the perpetrator. In a town in the South of Italy, an individual of 50 years old (from now on, labeled as Mister X), declaring to be blind, with many judicial precedents for frauds, circumventions of incapables, violence, false declarations of identity and sexual abuse against minors, made people believe that he was a catholic priest. He served Masses and organized apparitions during which, according to him, he would receive holy messages directly from God and the Madonna, that he transcribed faithfully. Besides managing two religious houses for the reception of groups of “believers” who trusted his visions, Mister X would also visit personally many of the believers to pray with them, serve Masses and offer his providential support to help people to face their difficulties. He had founded a religious community, to which both lays and priests would belong to, these latter ones ordained personally by him. The local hierarchic catholic community attempted many times to invite the local community not to give credit to this person, by sending invitations and then mandatory documents, but these attempts turned out to be unsuccessful. Despite these messages, in short time, a significant amount of people, belonging to different socio-economical and cultural backgrounds, adhered to this “religious community” and took part to its activities: welcome of and support to people affected by economical, psychological and social difficulties; Masses, religious rituals, exorcisms; apparitions, praying meetings around statues with lachrymation phenomena. Through such activities, Mister X and his acolytes exerted fascination, attraction and suggestion on the group of proselytes.

It must be underlined that while we were conducting the expert investigation on Mister X and on the abused children, the university departments where the activities were taking place become the target of attention and attempts of conditioning and psychological pressure by a chain of people adhering or simply sympathizing with the "religious" man: these people surrounded the university building, until the police forced them to clear out. They prayed, sang, engage in fasting and praying pathways, on one side, to express their solidarity with their religious leader and, on the other, to influence and suggest the young victims/witnesses. From a psycho-social perspective, the religious group founded by Mister X represented for the followers a "safety devise", protecting them deceptively against social isolation, life difficulties and crisis by belonging to an apparently well-structured socio-cultural group. Indeed, many of their ritual and symbolic collective behaviors accomplished the function at first to represent a threat, and then to mitigate it (threats were, for example, the "attack" from police, magistracy and experts through their investigations; financial, personal, psychopathological and existential problems, from which it was necessary to defend themselves with prays, collective rituals, fasting). Therefore, these protective activities were simulated in order to defend themselves from vulnerabilities and dangers, by facing them on a symbolic level [11,12] and explanatory schemas were elaborated and shared in order to justify conditions which were difficult to stand [13,14].

In such conditions, interferences, suggestive in content and essentially regressive in nature, may take place, that is a sort of breakdown of the distinction between fantasy and reality, which can hamper or impede the regular stream of cognitive reasoning, and take the form of "mental contagion" [15]. These phenomena are characterized by collective suggestibility, heavily exalted in each individual of the group, who is ready to accept and interiorize feelings, ideas, behaviors and impulses they would reject in normal conditions. Such conditions may favor dogmatic thoughts, based on coercive intentions from whom plays the "leader's mind", with no place for reasoning; also, the phenomenon labeled by [16] as "idolatrous passion" may take place, that is the mobilization of the omnipresent desire for an idol. Such condition may lead a group to adopt a blind and fideistic delegating attitude, so to become unable to follow its own conscience, in favor of a tendency to obey to a person who presents himself as an omnipotent idol. This is the reason why Freud et al. [15] defines *Unheimlich*, the condition in which the thought functions in a hyper-adaptive way, that is, by considering familiar those attitudes that normally are not socially acceptable. Because of the vagueness of affects and values, indefiniteness can turn disturbing contents into familiar ones.

In such context, briefly described, the criminal dynamic and criminal genesis took place, leading to the episodes of sexual abuse against 5 minors, 4 (of 10, 13, 14 e 17 years old, respectively) belonging to the same family and the fourth being a cousin of them. All the minors were exposed to significant risk factors for child sexual abuse [17] because they all belonged to multi-problematic families with economic and relational difficulties and they all had met Mister X during praying meetings. When Mister X came to know about the economic difficulties of the two families, he started making "pastoral visits" to them: during those visits, we proposed to both families to welcome at his houses-shrines their children, during the periods they were off from school and during summer time. Moreover, he declared his availability at the Local Social Services to foster care the children, denouncing instrumentally and with manipulative intents, their families' difficulties. He declared that within their families, the children

were sexually abused and neglected. The minors started to live at the religious communities that he managed, spending there at the beginning just a few days up to many weeks, sometime later. Further on, thanks' to their investigations, the local social workers discovered the truth about Mister X's identify, and this discovery started a judicial inquiry. The minors disclosed to have been sexually abused, although in manners which appeared to be very peculiar and rarely reported among the scientific literature and in expert experience. In the context of the police's and expert's inquiry, the victims declared that Mister X got sexually excited especially in the presence of holy images (crucifix, Saints' and Madonna's images, rosaries), when he would ask them to pray together, during confession or while he was exerting his "spiritual guidance". In those moments, he would masturbate the minors, ask them to undress in front of him, to touch their genitals, to be touched and to entertain in sexual effusions and exchanges with each other in his presence. The most peculiar trait of this case has to do with the manners in which the offences were expressed, because all these episodes would happen while Mister X was wearing his holy hangings and suit or in the presence of holy symbols and images. These sexual practices are comparable to *ierophylia*, a condition in which the individual achieve sexual excitement till orgasm mainly in the presence of the crucifix or of other holy objects, hangings and images or similar objects [18-20]. Indeed, the most hateful crimes for which Mister X was convicted can be labeled as "holy" because they involve a universe of meanings belonging to the religious domain. In fact, the sexual abuses against the minors were carried out in places and during rituals which have the power to evoke the membership to Catholicism (Saints' images, hangings, prays, etc.). The criminal intent was not only supported by the fact that Mister X gave himself to be a "priest", but also by the fact that the episodes took place in circumstances in which the holy sphere was exalted. Therefore, the severity of the sexual abuse is not only increased by the manipulation of his identity, but also because of the violation to the socio-cultural norm according to which sexuality and religiousness must be kept separate.

With this respect, the victims' speech during their testimony in the many phases of the prosecution is very illuminating. These sequences of texts were subjected to Content Analysis [21] and Discourse Analysis [22]. While the first method focuses on how the concepts are articulated – the "what" –, the second one analyzes how the discourse is built: in this latter case, language is not conceived as an abstract entity, but text and words are constituents of the reality in social practices [23]. It is assumed that the meaning of any text unwinds on two dimensions, the conventional one (the meaning of a word in itself) and the situational one, which identifies the environment giving life to a specific meaning. Therefore, we use here the psycho-semiotic concept of *diatext*, describing "the context from the perspective of the speakers of the text, as they represent it and as they show to keep it into account during their discourses" [24]. The *diatext* is the text shown just in its "efforts after meaning" [22] where, at the same time, "there is nothing outside the text" [25] and "there is nothing outside context" [26].

"*Diatext* is the internal context of text which is manifest in discourse construction, i.e. where enunciation is planned. Because it must be appropriate to the structure of the situation (the external context), the text takes over and attempts to integrate it as much as possible. Obviously this assimilatory tension is only found in the end product as traces which reflect the co-producers' enunciative efforts. *Diatext* attempts to capture the dynamics of meaning construction during interplay, at that point in time where the semiotic dice are cast to determine any discursive fate" [24].

In fact, sense does not reside permanently within the text, rather it goes through it as the result of the conjunct action of the enunciators who actively negotiate the frame which they are involved in. The diatextual analysis aims at identifying the process through which individuals internalize the context and the identity of which they feel in charge of, while acting as speakers. In this paper, we will only report on some discourse markers showing how Mister X was able to extort trust from these children, so to sexually abuse of them.

The minors' accounts during the expert investigations highlight that Mister X's criminal strategy of the "false priest" was very accurate. Besides isolating them from their families and from their background, he proposed himself as a caring father, concerned of their introversion, economical difficulties and health. From the minors' view, Mister X was worthy of trust because he was capable to satisfy their basic needs of intimacy, as the excerpts 1 to 3 clearly show.

Ex. 1: "He used to call me 'little child of mine'".

Ex. 2: "As if he was a real father that stands near us and sings us a lullaby, for example".

Ex. 3: "He wanted me to believe it was a good thing to do and that it was right".

In the minors' verbal reconstruction, trust is the result of highly affective interactions: the adjectives and the possessive pronouns "mine", "we", "us", the positive polarization as shown by the adjectives "good", "right", and the emotional vocabulary – "father", "child", "lullaby" – are clearly indicative of the intense affective bond they had developed.

The "false priest" would also give the children money, so that they would not reveal what was happening. Moreover, he threatened them by saying that if they would have told someone, they would have been institutionalized and would have lost forever the contacts with their families. Lastly, to avoid the families getting in touch with each other and with the social workers, he spoke badly about them to each other. In this way, he heightened a condition of social isolation and conflict within each family.

The "false priest" was skillful in selecting his victims: he chose family contexts characterized by isolation and by economic, affective and socio-cultural deprivation. At the beginning, we elicited in the families and victims a sense of respect, trust and dependency (a phase that we can label as enticement), much earlier than when the first sexual and physical contacts with the minors took place (the violence phase). On such an irregular ground, there is clear evidence that in many occasions the victims acted in good faith, as the minors also told, being well conscious of the difficulties of their families:

Ex. 4: "My mother thought I could live better and although I was not really convinced, last summer she sent me at his home, exclusively in my interest".

Indeed, the charming power to influence and condition minors with peculiar vulnerabilities as those involved in this case, is evident. It is possible to suggest that the intersection between the parents' desire of attention on one side and the high esteem in which they held the false priest on the other, lead the minors to become particularly vulnerable. The young victims felt at the beginning as they were "selected", "special", because chosen, invited and cared by such a charismatic figure. The violence that he exerted caused the minors to feel confused and betrayed, once they realized what they had really experienced, and this experience was exacerbated by the "the secret bond". With this

respect, a clear example is represented by the abuses perpetrated during interactions to which the religious rites attribute the maximum degree of intimacy:

Es. 5: "Sometimes, also during the confession, he would say: touch here, touch here".

The scientific literature and the clinical experience of rehabilitating abused children highlight both that the worse sequelae from a psychological and developmental standpoint, occur when the perpetrator is a significant other and has an affective relationship with the victim, such as when a father or a mother is the abusing person. This is why intra-family sexual abuse is particularly severe and harmful for a minor). In the victims' words (see below excerpts 6 to 8), the confusing and dangerous relationship is which there were involved in described like a paradoxical situation that clearly expresses the double nature of the abusing person: during the day, the false priest proposes himself as a reassuring person and as a good father; in the evening he would become a cynical criminal.

Ex. 6: "During the night he did those things, but during the day he seemed to be a normal priest, only in the evening he had these tics".

Ex. 7: "In the morning he seemed good and kind, yet in the evening he seemed to go crazy... I would see the strange things only in the evening".

Ex. 8: "During the day he was a good person, he would act as if he was a father, although he was not, and then in the evening... he touched us".

In these excerpts, the false priest's "duplicité" becomes clear in the comparisons connected with adversative conjunction "but" and "yet": "seem" vs. "be", "day" vs. "evening/night", "good" and "kind" vs. "crazy".

This construction, together with the words "tics" and "go crazy", is a clear attempt to interpret the perpetrator's abnormal behavior. This polarization is well exemplified in the contrast, as it emerges from the victims' words, between two images, that of an "angel" and that of the "Father Devil", that derive from the religious word. On the other side, the minors seem to be conscious about the distinction between what is an authentic religious experience and the nasty experience they were going through:

Ex. 9: "When someone sees Jesus, he doesn't do those things... when Jesus makes someone the gift to become able to see him, I do not think that Jesus would also allow him to do those things".

The impersonal way of talking about his experience, by using terms as "someone", "a person", "those things", reveals the minor's intention to show up his disappointment for his betrayed trust.

Conclusions

The system of religious meanings and the subjective faith contracts are built upon beliefs, feelings and values. The crimes presented in this paper are particularly hateful because they hit the belief in justice, the feeling of being accepted and protected, values of respect and altruism, highly valued by all religions. Because faith accomplishes the fundamental function of reducing the complexity of the world, on a symmetrical level, its abuse/betrayal leads to awful shift towards uncertainty, as an unbearable human condition.

The first peculiar root of the "holy crimes" stands in the fact that Mister X presents himself to others as if he was a "priest", and therefore he aimed at being held in high esteem, which is the treatment that the

exponents of the bi-millenary Catholic institution usually receive in that local context: the priests, based on the etymon "people devoted to holy". Of course, both the Church as a religious Institution as well as the Court of civil justice convicted Mister X, because of being a "false priest" and a "fake priest", respectively. Although the words "false" and "fake" are sometimes used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. "False" evokes semantic meanings of negativity on an epistemic level as "what is not corresponding to the reality" and from a moral standpoint "what serves deception and manipulation intents". The word "fake" evokes, on an epistemic level, the semantic feature of simulation as "what is built according to a model", and, on an esthetic one, "what originates from creativity".

The "false priest" takes advantage from the familiarity and proximity guaranteed by the religious rites, in order to create a context of intimacy for his crimes. From the minors' view, he appears in a double image: on one side, "bright" – educator, benefactor, reliable – and on the other side as "dark" – crazy and odd. This day/evening contrast reminds and distorts the original sense of "holy", as a "mysterium" suspended between the "tremendum" and the "fascinans" [27]. In this case, the crime is established on the transformation of human ambivalence in the Macchiavelli-like "duplicity": the interactive and flexible settings of the "dialogic self" [28] are converted into a strategic switch of positions belonging to a "dual-logic self".

By presenting himself as a "priest", even though he was not, Mister X established pathways of false and fake meanings in order to make sure that the success of the "fakeness" would overtake the risk for the "falseness" to be discovered. But why would Mister X have the need to "pass himself off as a priest"? Because he has the idea that who carries out holy functions has more opportunities to get in touch with children, especially disadvantaged ones, and also because he can benefit from an attribution of trust, that is generalized and legitimated from the "top" (both from the social tradition and the transcendence). Minors in general, and deprived ones in particular, as those selected by the offender, have a very concrete cognitive way of thinking, and therefore are less competent in separating the idea and the concept of a "metaphysical God" from that of the "delegate" or "representative", that is the "priest" (in addition "fake"). The priest reminds the idea of an omniscient and omnipotent good God-Father. It can be hypothesized that the abuse perpetrated by a priest (either real or fake) can cause wounds as severe as those caused by abuses perpetrated within the family context.

In the case of Mister X, the abuses against four of the five minors (one of whom was only ten years old, while the others ranging between fourteen and seventeen) stated during adolescence. Because this is a period of change, transition and transformation, any violation to a relationship based on trust, has devastating consequences. A very common metaphor compares this phase in life to a "journey": towards the unknown, towards the "other-than-self". This is represented especially by the world of adults that fascinates and frightens at the same time, because what is at stake is the developmental task of searching an identity, in contrast to "confusion" [29] What happened between the "false/fake priest" and the minors represents a relational, before than a sexual, betrayal, perpetrated by the father of the children's extended family, whom they have learned, from birth, to trust more than anyone else, and second only to God.

In this case, there is a double injury, because the priest is "fake", even though he would present himself for long time as a "real" one. As a matter of fact, in order to pursue his criminal intent, Mister X perpetrated a first abuse against trust, by making people believe that he

was someone he was not, and a second abuse, by soliciting behaviors in contrast with the moral principles intrinsic to his (supposed) religious function.

As a consequence of such abuses, the expectation that, besides the psychological damages, the minors will undergo an amplification of their feelings of confusion and betrayal, is more than simply a risk. With this respect, the severe punishment for such scandals provided by the Gospel appears well justified: "it would be better for him to have a great millstone around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Mt 18, 6). But, as cultural psychologists, we are aware that the history of the human communities has development more effective instruments to re-establish trust as a basic resource of interpersonal and social relationships.

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