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Why should we care. Review of *Child sexual abuse. Interdisciplinary approach (Wykorzystanie seksualne małoletnich. Ujęcie interdyscyplinarne)*, P. Studnicki, M. Cholewa (eds.), Scriptum, Krakow 2021 volume 1 and 2

Sexual abuse in the Church is one of the most dramatic crises that the Catholic Church is facing in the XXI century. The pain caused to the victim-survivors by the perpetrators is of the biggest scale, however – it doesn't end with the victims. It spreads throughout the Church community, causing parishes, dioceses and entire national churches to suffer the consequences. The crisis doesn't close in the Church environment either. Pope Francis underlined that “we are facing a universal problem, tragically present almost everywhere and affecting everyone.”¹

In fact, sexual abuse of minors affects the Church in every country on every continent because it is a part of a broader issue: the issue of sexual abuse of minors in general. According to UNICEF, 1 out of every 10 children experiences sexual abuse globally. Numbers are also significant on our continent: according to the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 18 million European children are victims of sexual abuse.²

¹ Pope Francis 2019. “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis” at the close of the Eucharistic Celebration following the meeting for the Protection of Minors in the Church. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190224_incontro-protezioneminori-chiusura.html

² P. Guzik, An Unfinished Story of Conversion, Church, Communications and Culture, Volume 5, 2020, issue 3, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2020.1827963>

The crime of child sexual abuse, famously called by Jesuit expert Fr. Hans Zollner “the murder of the soul,”³ happens in families and schools, sports teams and scout groups.

But all have something in common: an environment of trust, which most predators try to exploit to their advantage. As Pope Francis has repeatedly said, sexual abuse of minors “is always the result of an abuse of power, an exploitation of the inferiority and vulnerability of the abused.”⁴

From the amount of media reports and the level of scandal it causes to hear about instances of sexual abuse, one would think the knowledge about the problem itself is vast. The truth is, however, that the knowledge about the causes of child sexual abuse, its prevention and its impact on societies is still, in fact, very basic. Even in the United States, where the Church was put under the spotlight 20 years ago, and impressive best practices in prevention have been put to place, the society as a whole is only at the beginning of the process of learning the scope of the scandals. Victims from public schools, sports associations, community groups and scout teams are only starting to emerge.

What measures do we have at hand to prevent these crimes? How do we seek safe environments in the Church and in broader society? What kind of change has been put on the table since the issue became globally known, both in societies and in church environments?

These are important questions to answer and one series answers those matters, seeking information on what has been done to fight sexual abuse in the institution that constantly falls under the spotlight: the Catholic Church.

Edited by Fr. Piotr Studnicki and Fr. Marcin Cholewa, “Child Sexual Abuse. Interdisciplinary Approach” brings knowledge to the table. It doesn’t aim to focus on scandal and the aspects most often provided by the media. “What will be published in the volumes are articles focused on broadly understood care – care for the vulnerable – child, adolescent and vulnerable adults; it will be focused on protecting their rights and focused on providing proper help for them, help that will let them thrive.”⁵

³ Hans Zollner, interview with Polish Television, TVP, 2019.

⁴ P. Guzik, *An Unfinished Story of Conversion, Church, Communications and Culture*, Volume 5, 2020, issue 3, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2020.1827963>

⁵ P. Studnicki, M. Cholewa (eds.), *Wykorzystanie seksualne małoletnich. Ujęcie interdyscyplinarne*. Eng: *Child sexual abuse. Interdisciplinary approach*, Scriptum, Krakow 2021, p. 7.

What emerges as one of the most important aspects of the two first volumes of the series is in fact hidden in the subtitle: interdisciplinary approach.

“To catch the complexity of this dramatic problem (of child sexual abuse), it is necessary to take a look at it from the psychological, medical, pedagogical, sociological, legal, theological, ethical, historical, communications and institutional perspective”⁶ – the authors write.

The first volume starts with an important component indispensable to enter the debate regarding Church sexual abuse – sociological and statistical aspects of the problem.

In countries where the Catholic Church has requested an investigation on the numbers and typology of cases of sexual abuse by clerics, such as the United States (John Jay College of Criminal Justice 2004), Holland (Deetman Report 2011), Germany (MHG Study 2019) or where there was an official investigation run by the State, such as in Ireland (Ryan Commission 2009; Murphy Report 2009) and Australia (Royal Commission 2017), the findings show similar results: from 1950 to 2000, around 4–6% of Catholic priests abused a minor. On different occasions, the Holy See has mentioned that the global figure is around 3–4% (Vatican Press Office 2019).⁷

Fr. Wojciech Sadłoń looks at the Polish statistics in the Church – its methodology and goal of the data already collected (statistics that are, it’s necessary to say, incomplete, since an independent investigation has not been conducted in the Church in Poland). The expertise proves Poland has the resources and know-how to conduct independent investigation, whether internal and Church-led or an external one.

Volume one later focuses on the psychological aspect of the abuse, looking closely at consequences on child sexual abuse on the child’s behavior right after the abuse and many years afterwards.

It is of highest importance for the Church community to understand the harm done by the sexual perpetrator to a child. Excuses of such behaviors are unacceptable today and the articles provided in the volume give clear examples of why each and every member of the community should care that those crimes

⁶ P. Studnicki, M. Cholewa (eds.), *Wykorzystanie seksualne małoletnich. Ujęcie interdyscyplinarne*. Eng: *Child sexual abuse. Interdisciplinary approach*, Scriptum, Krakow 2021, p. 8.

⁷ P. Guzik, *An Unfinished Story of Conversion, Church, Communications and Culture*, Volume 5, 2020, issue 3, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2020.1827963>

never happen again. Importantly, the psychological study of the perpetrator is also provided in the volume in the article by Jesuit Fr. Jacek Prusak.

Tomasz Franc writes about the mechanisms that open the path for abuse in Church institutions, putting up visible red flags that should be waved at any parish, community house, sports club and kindergarten in order to prevent abuse.

Volume one is also a solid study of canon law with regard to the issue of child sexual abuse. Authors, including members of the canon law avenue of fame in the country, such as Fr. Piotr Majer, Fr. Jan Dohnalik and Aleksandra Brzemia-Bonarek, concentrate on many important aspects such as the proceeding of the cases of child sexual abuse in canon law and accountability, crucial for the process of cleaning up Church environment from cover up and abuse of power.

Important aspects of the volume also touch on the issue of criminal and civil law in the country – such as protection of the minor according to criminal law in Poland, as well as the aspect of financial compensations.

Volume two of the series focuses on interdisciplinary reflections on sexual abuse – starting with the biblical perspective – the dignity of the child in Old and New Testament is studied by Fr. Wojciech Węgrzyniak. Other authors look at the historical aspect of abuse and its depiction in literature throughout centuries.

An important part of this volume is also theological perspective. For instance, Grzegorz Strzelczyk presents selected ecclesiological conditions favoring an inadequate response to sexual abuse in the Church.

The institutional approach is also well represented in the volume, highlighting the importance of spiritual guidance for victim-survivors, proper safeguarding-oriented formation in seminaries as well as giving an overview on the initiatives and structures already built in the Church in Poland.

The editors of the series want to put the phenomenon of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults under spotlight not for the purpose of highlighting the problems of the Church, but with the purpose of finding a solution to evil – and this solution is always knowledge and best practices. The subject – authors highlight – is already “a vivid subject of public debate and media interest” – they, however, want it to “also to become an area of in-depth reflection and scientific discussion in academia.”⁸

⁸ P. Studnicki, M. Cholewa (eds.), *Wykorzystanie seksualne małoletnich. Ujęcie interdyscyplinarne*. Eng: *Child sexual abuse. Interdisciplinary approach*, Scriptum, Krakow 2021, p. 9.

John Paul II famously said that “The Church in our time is striving more and more to become a ‘glass house’, transparent and credible. And that is to be welcomed.”⁹ This series – aiming to help victim survivors to be cured and understood, helping the Church communities to report and protect and overall – to create a safe environment with zero tolerance approach to abuse – is of high need and importance for the Church in Poland. And while the Church in Poland already became a reference point to many Churches in Central and Eastern Europe – it may be a ray of light and necessary guidance for many smaller Churches in the region.

⁹ John Paul II, Address to the Conference of Austrian Bishops, June 21, 1998, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980621_austria-bishop.html