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Trends. The Political Psychology of Illicit Sex

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Scandal involving sexual behavior of Roman Catholic priests can be perceived as a projective construction developed by the general public. Recognition of the transgressing priests as odious may be a psychological defense against the self-recognition of odious predilection. Vilification of the transgressing priests may be an indirect process of direct masochism. The very hotly embraced notion of adult-child sexual engagement as a vile transgression--as an anathema--may be a defense against self-recognition of such engagement as desirable and even erotic.

An important--perhaps the most important--service provided by priests, other religious figures, and political leaders in general is the offering of oneself as the completion of a dyadic configuration and for the knowing an unknowing facilitation of positive and negative transference within the configuration. Scandal is a manifestation of a shift from positive to negative transference and also of the leader's enmeshment within that leader's own countertransference.

Beyond the psychological and psychodynamic jargon and beyond violations of religious and secular law, of social standards, and of many ethical and moral criteria, the offending priests and those who take offense are caught up in a political psychology that can only be partially knowable. It is in this last context that one might consider Pope John Paul II's seeming ambivalence about a zero-tolerance policy towards illicit sexual behavior. He has stated that "We cannot forget the power of Christian conversion, that radical decision to turn away from sin and back to God, which reaches to the depths of a person's soul and can work extraordinary change."

A series of inferences posed as questions can be constructed from the Pope's statement. Are we not all guilty? Are we not all sinful in mind, body, and spirit? And are we not all incapable of compliance with intolerance towards evil? None of this excuses or covers for transgression. All of this alludes to the coupling of love and hate and of good and evil that constitutes the realm of the human condition. (See Falkenhain, M. A., Duckro, P. N., Hughes, H. M., Rossetti, S. J., & Gfeller, J. D. (1999). Cluster analysis of child sexual offenders: A validation with Roman Catholic priests and brothers. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 6, 317-336; Fones, C. S. L., Levine, S. B., Althof, S. E., & Risen, C. B. (1999). The sexual struggles of 23 clergymen: A follow-up study. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 25, 183-195; Henneberger, M. (April 24, 2002). Pope offers apology to victims of sex abuse by priests. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A22; Lehne, G. K., & Money, J. (2000). The first case of paraphilia treated with Depo-Provera: 40-year outcome. *Journal of Sex Education & Therapy*, 25, 213-220; Oerton, S., & Phoenix, J. (2001). *Sex/bodywork: Discourses and practices*. *Sexualities*, 4, 387-412.) (Keywords: Catholicism, Illicit Sex, Priests, Sexual Abuse)