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Stanley Kubrick 1962 film, *Lolita*, based on Vladimir Nabokov's groundbreaking novel,¹ is both sensitive, offensive, and thereby controversial. While Nabokov tries to get inside the perverted soul of the main character, Humbert, the film traces the wretched consequences of Humbert's poisonous infatuation with the young girl, his guilt and turmoil. Though not explicitly stated, we are left to assume that Humbert developed this paedophilic behaviour in response to a lost love at the time of his own pubescence. When fourteen years old he fell in love with a girl his own age; the two developed an intense puppy love for each other, but the girl suddenly dies of typhus a few months later. The shock of her death froze something in him: 'I kept looking for her.' The passion was in the wound ... and the wound would not heal. The storyline narrates Humbert's fixation, his struggle to recapture the innocence and pleasure associated with that first love.

Four decades later, increased focus on paedophilic behaviours entered the public domain because of criminal cases involving perpetrators from all levels of society – church, sports, media, families, schools, the professions etc. Relatively little is known of how perpetrators view themselves or understand themselves. In recent years, there has been increasing scientific research, but even so, research studies indicate that paedophilia is a complex phenomenon, its aetiology cautious. Cited as potential causes are an inheritable condition or epigenetic changes that act on genes. Aetiology and epistemology being inconclusive, understanding remains nascent.

In this article I argue that as Christians we cannot sidestep the human person behind appalling behaviours of abuse of minors/ children i.e., persons under 18 years old. My focus is *pastoral*

1 Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. 1st Vintage international ed. New York, Vintage, 1989.

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and attempts in particular to sketch a scant profile of the clerical perpetrator of paedophilic behaviour in order to inform an appropriate pastoral ethos in a Christian faith context.

UNDERSTANDING

According to the DSM-5, paedophilia (Paedophilic Disorder) is defined as recurrent experiences of intense sexual arousal, fantasies, sexual urges involving sexualised behaviour with a prepubescent child or children, usually under the age of fourteen and carried out by a person sixteen years and over. While the DSM-5 indicates that paedophilic disorder might be a lifelong condition, symptoms can change or decrease with age. Treatment is also possible, mainly aimed at managing these urges without acting on them.

Clinicians distinguish between two groups of perpetrators of child abuse. *First*, those who do *not* have a sexual attraction for children *per se*, but who for various reasons sexually abuse children. For example, this category may lack the necessary social skills to develop and maintain emotional or sexual relationships with appropriately aged peers, looking to children as surrogate ‘replacement’ partners². *Secondly*, there are those who *have* a clear sexual preference for prepubescent minors and/or hebephilia (i.e., clear sexual preference for pubescent minors)³.

Further, a distinction is also made between ‘*acquired*’ and *developmental* paedophilia. The first resulting from organic brain changes – the second suggested but mainly unknown causes. Society at large is replete with opinions and propositions. For example, paedophiles are born that way, their brain wired to an interest in children in a way impossible to reverse. Other associations link paedophilia and same-gender attraction together, or as a condition afflicting only men.

A substantial body of research regarding histories of being abused as a child sexually and/or emotionally, points to a strong link *between* childhood sexual abuse and later paedophilic interests. It is speculated that such a history might make it more difficult to empathize with a child being abused. Studies intimate that about one third of adults who abuse children were themselves abused. Theorists conjecture that the paedophile either wants to identify with their abuser or conquer their feelings of powerlessness by becoming an abuser themselves. In other words, historical abuse becomes imprinted on the psyche.

2 Mokros, A., Osterheider, M., and Nitschke, J. (2012). Pedophilia: prevalence, etiology and diagnostics. *Der Nervenarzt* 83, 355-358.

3 Seto, M. C., Lalumière, M. L., & Kuban, M. (1999). The sexual preferences of incest offenders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 108 (2), 267-272.

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Other environmental related variables are mentioned to include mental health issues within the family matrix, post-traumatic stress, or other traumatic experiences in the paedophile's early life, any, or all of which may contribute to atypical maturity development. Social conditioning such as exposure to pornography, sexually inappropriate conversations or sexualised culture may also play a part.

In summary, one understanding being considered is that some paedophiles appear fixated or stuck at a certain stage of development (psycho-sexual-social immaturity), while physiology otherwise matures typically. The developmental lag may manifest in a sexual preference for children. Conceivably, this explains why so many paedophiles identify more with children than adults and may 'believe' molesting children as harmless.

PROFILE

Perpetrators of child abuse can present as likeable do-gooders, kind, generous, even inspirational to children and families. Approachable, charismatic, accessible, are also traits described by survivors; when found out they can be characterised as monsters or evil. However, therapists are learning that there is yet another side to the perpetrator – a disassociated part hidden from the individual and public gaze - a *private* self not easily admitted by the perpetrator or recognisable by others. Two personas in one skin, partitioned from each other to the extent that confrontation or reminder of their untoward actions may likely evoke rage and robust denial.

Narcissism and self-centred personality traits - treating others like objects, are commonly present, believing their behaviour as normal to meet their needs (*ego-syntonic desire*⁴). Such traits may be disguised or hidden also because unacceptable to society at large. Which begs the question whether or not a cunning understanding of the antisocial component of their behaviour is recognised in part, demonstrated by a degree of control and *modus operandi* in victim selection, protecting their secret by offering money, gifts, favours/preferential treatment. (However, in some instances where deviant behaviours result from brain malfunction due to organic changes, perpetrator's capacity to choose their actions may be compromised, and as such might be regarded as victims of a crime of which they themselves have little understanding).

4 Instincts or ideas that are acceptable to the self; that are compatible with one's values and ways of thinking consistent with one's fundamental personality and beliefs – there is unlikely to be any conflict about the act and there is little or no guilt as a result.

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Like substance abusers, many perpetrators seem to live with a *complex* psychic denial structure, or barrier to admission, inhibiting the capacity to process guilt and shame, thereby protecting from internal distress⁵. Admission of shame is further complicated in the case of priests/religious because of their elevated social and cultural standing, high moral demands of Church, and often the pride and joy of family.

FAITH LIFE

I recall meeting a clerical perpetrator while working in a psychiatric ward in another country. He had overdosed but survived and his sentiments remained mixed. Although disappointed at a human level that his turmoil had not ended, he believed at a faith/existential level that there was a mystery in the moment. His hour had not yet come ... given a second chance. He said he once had a thriving faith life that drove his vocational call to ministry, doing good in the best viable way. This remained true for him, but as the habitual paedophilic behaviours took hold, his inner spirit became choked and was less open or desirous of light.

Thus began a spiritual journey, his faith rekindled by the belief he once knew a benevolent God, a good shepherd, who is constant in looking out for us, searches us out when we have strayed or lost our way.

Some perpetrators might well associate with the words of Kahil Gibran: *I am a stranger to myself – a stranger in this world, and there is a severe solitude and painful lonesomeness in my exile*. The complexity of their inner distress may also explain the tendency to self-violence and the heightened incidence of death by suicide amongst perpetrators. Even then public sympathy can be limited, as in judgementalism, or accusations of cowardice in facing the truth of their actions.

PASTORAL ORIENTATIONS

How can we as a faith community and Church *better* respond to the clerical perpetrator? A disposition modelling Jesus in his treatment of the woman caught in adultery recognises that no one is without sin (John 8: 7). Understandable caution in pastoral accompanying needs to be matched by a sense of mysterious adventure in faith, so that a perpetrator feels encouraged and supported to stay *engaged* with the inner wrestle until 'morning light' breaks.

5 *Shame* is how you feel/perceive emotion arising from consciousness of dishonouring oneself. *Guilt* is the feeling of responsibility for an action or event: a felt need to redress what you have done or fail to do.

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A wider faith community founded on the spirit of Titus 3:4-5 – that God saves us not because of the righteous deeds we have done but out of his compassion and kindness, enables *feeling* a way towards those who are exiled from themselves and others, helping them to belong to the one family of God's children. (Acts 17: 27).

Parish initiatives might look to developing a ministry of prayer guidance/spiritual companions dedicated to known clerical perpetrators. Readily noticed is an absence of designated training for prayer guides who are available to accompany perpetrators. We are learning that the unique manifestation of their impaired spirit life requires an approach that is nuanced differently.

Prayers of the Church can uphold us when we ourselves cannot pray - room for a dedicated ministry of prayer for healing and restoration of relationship with God. Such offers solace e.g., faith sharing groups that provide safe/sacred space for known perpetrators to share their narratives in a spirit *that awakens in us not what we have committed, not of how we went astray, but how much God loves and saves us* (Soren Kierkegaard).

CORPORATE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Paul offers a fitting pastoral reminder that we are all individual members of the one body of Christ: *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together* (1 Corinthians 12: 24 -27). Therein lies corporate responsibility, not just to endorse a Christian response to perpetrators, but also include resolute attention to systemic structures and practices to embed a culture of prevention in the Church. I pose a few questions for consideration:

- How to intercept the culture of 'silence and secrets' in the Church in a way that allows the faith community to engage more openly in uncomfortable conversations regarding the reality of clerical perpetrators?
- *We have this treasure in earthen vessels ...* (2 Corinthians 4: 7) offers the subtext that grounds an understanding of our flawed human condition *vis-a-vis* its divine facet. How can priests/religious guard against disproportionate attention to the *spiritual* relative to the *human* to secure more wholesome living?
- Application, screening, and assessment processes for prospective candidates present an opportunity for church authorities to glean a fuller understanding of the implications of assessment outcomes. How to focus particular attention on psychosexual/ social maturity in lieu of what knowledge we have of both

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paedophilia and developmental ‘lags’ that pose a potential risk for adult-clerics to seek minors as ‘surrogate’ partners?

- How to help enhance the confidence and acumen of pastoral ministers through ongoing ministry formation that is less didactic and, instead, more open to explorations/conversations of the psychodynamic nature and complexity of psycho-sexual/interpersonal issues, delivered by those persons competent in the field?
- The 2012 documentary film- *Are All men Paedophiles?*⁶ presents a wakeup call, a need for men to cultivate a *discipline* of self-mindfulness regarding internal restraints that protect against acting out fantasies on minors. Included here is having a personal sense of shame and guilt in the ordinary events of living, a capacity to feel empathy when children are harmed; an awareness of inappropriate exploitation of others in meeting one’s own needs and of the connection between loneliness, low mood, melancholia, and sexual fantasies etc. In general, are my attitudes and values consistent with moral and spiritual beliefs that caution against sexually inappropriate behaviours?

CONCLUSION

We all share a flawed humanity; God’s indomitable spirit of goodness makes for a difference. As a Christian community what part can we play in responding to the clerical perpetrator? Clerical perpetrators carry part of our collective darkness as errant human persons. The weight of their exile, punishment, maybe even scapegoating, belongs to all of us. It follows that central to any response involves the wider faith community, compelled by our Christian ethos. Uncomfortable conversations must begin.

6 *Are all Men Paedophiles – 2012 documentary film by Jan-Willem Breure –* suggesting that all men are viewed as potential paedophiles and examines the political and social consequences of that assumption in an effort to raise awareness of efforts to protect children.