The Institute for Clinical Social Work

Catholic Mothers and the Unique Betrayal of Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse: A Psychoanalytic Case Study

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of five practicing, or formerly practicing, Catholic mothers in the United States who have an adult child who disclosed childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse more than one year ago. The research was conducted using a qualitative Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology. The widespread nature of the clergy abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, combined with the lack of research about the mothers of children who disclose such abuse, motivated the undertaking of this study.

Each participant was interviewed two or three times for a total of approximately four hours using a semi-structured interview format. The data was analyzed using a psychoanalytic theoretical lens. A within-case analysis produced categories of meaning for each participant individually. Overarching themes were created from the individual analyses during the subsequent cross-case analysis.

The findings suggest that Catholic mothers are subject to both a structural level of not-knowing and an individual, or familial, level of not-knowing that combine to keep their child's abuse, or potential for for abuse, out of their conscious level of awareness. When their child's disclosure brings the knowledge, of both the individual abusive acts of clergy and the Catholic institutional structure that houses and protects predatory clergy, to consciousness, four types of transformations occur. First, the mother must retrospectively reorganize her understanding of the institution of the Church. Second, there is an reconstitution of her faith and sense of institutional belonging, which may have a varied outcome. Third, there is a personal psychological transformation. Finally, some mothers must renegotiate their identity as their child's mother.

For my Psychotherapy Patients, Past and Present:

I hope I have helped

For Darius, Jay, and Lizzy:

You are the foundation of my heart

For Chris:

Words cannot fully capture the depth of your unwavering support for me

There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.

-St. Óscar Romero

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Chapter I

Introduction

General Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this Psychoanalytic Case Study (Tolleson, 1996) is to describe and understand the individual subjective experience of practicing, or formerly practicing, Roman Catholic mothers in the United States whose adult child or children have previously disclosed that they experienced clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse (CPSA) during their childhood. These mothers experienced the disclosure at least one year prior to being interviewed. Further, this study attempts to understand, in depth, how a small sample of these mothers has negotiated the aftermath of the disclosure, made meaning of this experience, or not, and whether the experience has been transformative. The concept of disclosure, in this context, is generally defined as a practicing Catholic mother learning, either directly from their adult child or through secondary sources, such as other family members, mental health professionals or law enforcement authorities, that their adult child experienced at least one non-consensual sexual experience, which was initiated by an ordained Catholic priest, while the child was under the age of eighteen. Although this study focuses specifically on the experiences of Roman Catholics, I will use the terms “Roman Catholic” and “Catholic” interchangeably. Further, although I am aware that the term “survivor” is more empowering than the word “victim” in the context of someone who has been sexually abused, I need to acknowledge that not all victims survive this experience. The son of one of the mothers who participated in this study did not survive his abuse. I do not want to erase the reality of how clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse actually affects many of its victims across their lifespans. Therefore, I am intentionally choosing to use the word victim, as the more

accurate term, for the purpose of this study. Finally, I acknowledge that although the title of this study refers to "Catholic mothers," more specifically, each participant was Catholic up until the time of her child's disclosure, and may not have continued to identify as Catholic after this time.

Significance of the Study for Clinical Social Work

The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) states that one of the broad ethical principles of our profession is to aid people in need and also to address social problems (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). It is in keeping with this principle that I proposed my study. This study provides a preliminary understanding of the experiences of mothers of those individuals who have been subject to CPSA. CPSA is directly related to the social problem of institutional abuse.

Social workers are called upon to understand the specific cultural milieus that individuals inhabit. Our code of ethics requests that we "obtain education about and demonstrate understanding of the nature of social diversity" in regards to, among other attributes, our clients' religion (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, Section 1.01). In this regard, my study required that I gain an academic understanding of Roman Catholicism, as well as learning directly from my participants, whom I consider to be the experts about their religious culture and experiences. Also, regarding the NASW value of upholding the integrity of the social work profession, this study allowed me to contribute to the knowledge base of social work, as called for by section 5.01 of the NASW Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

As a psychoanalytically trained and practicing clinical social worker, I also respect the core values of the American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work. I held these values in mind as I conducted this study and analyzed its results. In using a Psychoanalytic Case

Study methodology, I specifically "acknowledge the intersection of each individual's inner and outer world" and I aimed to "convey a psychoanalytic sensibility" to both this study and any resulting findings that impact my own and my colleagues' clinical work with practicing Catholics as well as anyone who is affected by clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse (American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work, 2024, Core Values).

In summary, I believe that this study is of value to the profession of clinical social work. My research gave an understudied population a voice in the literature and elucidated their experience of a significant event. These results inform future clinical work with, and identify needed support systems for, this distinct population.

Statement of the Problem and Specific Objectives to be Achieved

Roman Catholicism has been in existence for approximately two-thousand years and is the precursor of all Christian faiths. Many of its beliefs and practices are unique and distinguish it from other religions. For example, only men are ordained as priests, and each priest must take a vow of celibacy. Notably, practicing Catholics are raised to attribute God-like qualities to these exclusively male priests, bishops, cardinals, and the Pope. For example, the Pope is considered infallible and the authority of Magisterium allows the Pope and bishops to interpret the faith authoritatively as they are guided by the Holy Spirit. Further, in transubstantiation, the faithful believe that priests have the power to literally change bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994).

As has been widely documented in recent decades, clergy abuse of this power has resulted in widespread sexual abuse, perpetrated by parish priests and higher-ranking clergy, with both vulnerable individuals and minor children, predominantly boys, as their victims (John Jay

College of Criminal Justice, 2004). There have been allegations of systematic cover-ups and failures by the Church to address reports of abuse. Instead, church authorities often chose to protect offending clergy and prioritize the reputation of the Church over the well-being of victims (Frawley-O'Dea & Goldner, 2016). The revelation of thousands of cases of abuse and the mishandling of these cases by bishops and other church officials led to anger, disbelief, and loss of trust by Catholics and the broader public (Frawley-O'Dea, 2018; Guido, 2008).

Childhood sexual abuse is particularly insidious when it is committed within religious institutions. Clergy perpetrators are often able to build years-long trusting relationships with families before beginning to abuse the children of these families (Frawley-O'Dea, 2004). Further, many of these children, from devout families, have been taught from early childhood that priests should be trusted and respected just as Christ would be trusted and respected (Frawley-O'Dea & Goldner, 2016). Once clergy-perpetrated abuse is exposed, religious institutions may protect the perpetrators at the expense of the victims and their families (Frawley-O'Dea, 2004). In recent times, the most notable examples of childhood sexual abuse cases perpetrated by clergy were within the Roman Catholic Church.

The scope of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse within the Catholic Church is staggering. It has been estimated that over 5% of Catholic priests in the United States abused minors between the years of 1950 and 2004 (Frawley-O'Dea, 2018; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Terry, 2015; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006). These priests victimized approximately 11,000 minors during this time (Terry, 2015). Although more recent statistics do not appear in the literature, recent reports in the news media about individual dioceses suggest that this problem remains ongoing (Graham, 2023).

Further, in the case of clergy-perpetrated childhood sexual abuse, the abuse is additionally a betrayal of trust that greatly affects the victim (Easton et al., 2019; Isely et al., 2008), their family (Easton et al., 2019; Wind et al., 2008) and the parish community (Easton et al., 2019; Kline et al., 2008). For practicing Catholics, these issues are compounded by the fact that a priest is considered an *alter Christus*, or other Christ, (Frawley-O'Dea, 2018; Guido, 2008) and when this *alter Christus* sexually abuses a child, it is not just the child's body or psyche that is abused, it is also a violation of sacred trust and worldview (Guido, 2008). The distinctiveness of Roman Catholic culture causes clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of children to be a unique betrayal (Guido, 2008) and victims have described themselves as spiritual orphans (Guido, 2008). Complicating the situation is the fact that when incidences of clergy sexual abuse are made known within a parish, fellow parishioners often side with the clergy member and ostracize the victim and their family (Frawley-O'Dea, 2018).

There is a limited body of research on the impact of CPSA on the direct victims and survivors (Easton et al., 2019; Fogler et al., 2008a; Isely et al., 2008). The studies that have been conducted document effects that occur throughout the lifespan and include disturbances in psychosocial functioning immediately after the abuse (Isely et al., 2008), followed by low self-esteem and self-worth (Isely et al., 2008). In later adolescence, victims often develop a self-defeating manner of functioning that affects schooling, relations with peers and early intimate relationships (Fogler et al., 2008a). In the long term, victims of childhood sexual abuse report poor sleep, suicidal ideation, anger and, detachment from others (Fogler, et al., 2008b). In all, there is a very high chance that victims of childhood sexual abuse will experience compromised social, relational, and intrapsychic functioning during adulthood (Isely et al., 2008).

Even fewer studies have addressed family dynamics in the wake of a revelation of CPSA, therefore the literature addressing families affected by child sexual abuse, in general, must be considered. This limited research on child sexual abuse looks at the behavior of the family system as a whole and describes the family's collective investment in silence and denial (Almqvist & Broberg, 1997). Wind et al. (2008) found that the discovery of childhood sexual abuse was traumatic to the entire family system, but noted that there has been very little research that examines the reactions of parents in this context.

However, it is also apparent that parents, specifically, often feel guilt and shame in the aftermath of this type of trauma and that these feelings are difficult to express (Almqvist & Broberg, 1997; Hobfoll et al., 1991). One study found that mothers of sexually abused children, when compared to mothers of non-abused children, experienced more emotional distress and poorer general functioning than fathers do (Manion et al., 1996). Additionally, one small study of CPSA victims found that all participants reported that at least one parent had instilled a strong sense of reverence for the sanctity and trustworthiness of the clergy in them (Isely et al., 2008). When this sanctity and trust is betrayed, the family system is disrupted on many levels (Wind et al., 2008). Wind et al. (2008) also noted that there is a need for direct study of the various individual family members of victims of CPSA.

More recently, and more directly relevant to the present study, studies have been published concerning parents' and caregiver's experiences of disclosures of their minor children's sexual abuse (Fong et al., 2020; McElvaney & Nixon, 2020). Manay and Collin-Vézina (2021) published a systematic review of studies of children's and adolescents' disclosures. Another study looked at the effects of disclosure on siblings who had not been

victimized themselves (Crabtree et al., 2021). Finally, one recent study has examined the experiences of parents of adult survivors' disclosures of child sexual abuse (Sparks & Stoppa, 2022). These authors note that theirs was the first empirical study that centers on the parents of adult disclosers. None of these studies, however, specifically addressed the experience of disclosure in the context of clergy abuse and practicing Catholic families.

Thus, there are many stratifications that occur in the wake of CPSA, including the compounding factors of institutional and spiritual betrayal. Yet, there is a dearth of information about the effects of CPSA on the parents of the direct victims, particularly after some time has passed since the disclosure. Notably absent from the literature is any examination of the experiences of practicing Catholic mothers specifically, for whom the spiritual and institutional dimensions of the betrayal add a layer of complexity that existing research does not address.

Therefore, it may be said that clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse has been a profoundly distressing phenomenon within religious institutions and causes significant harm to both survivors and their families. While much attention has rightly been focused on the survivors of such abuse, little research has delved into the experiences of their parents, specifically the mothers. This study addressed this gap by exploring the lived experiences of mothers whose adult children have disclosed that clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse occurred during their childhood. By giving a voice to these mothers and understanding their experiences, this study examined the impact of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse on families and, more specifically, into the ways in which mothers managed the challenges of making meaning of a traumatic event, supported their own healing as well as their families' healing, and negotiated their relationship to the Catholic Church.

Research Questions to be Explored

This study explored the lived experiences of practicing Roman Catholic mothers whose adult children have previously disclosed clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse that occurred during their childhoods. These questions were designed to fill in the gaps in the existing literature on the experiences of this specific population. More specifically, this study further considered the following questions:

1. What were the psychological and emotional impacts on mothers after they learn of their adult child's prior childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse?
2. How was the mother's relationship to the Catholic Church affected by the disclosure?
3. What were the positive and/or negative effects on the relationship between the mother and her adult child?
4. What types of intrapsychic processes, if any, did the mothers use to cope with the disclosure?
5. How did the mother's ability to cope with or make meaning of the disclosure evolve over time?

Theoretical and Operational Definitions of Major Concepts

The following are operational definitions of the most used and theoretically significant terms in this study:

1. Mother: A female biological or adoptive primary caregiver of an adult child who has disclosed clergy sexual abuse that was perpetrated while they were a minor (under eighteen years old) child.

2. Practicing Roman Catholic: An individual who received, during childhood, the sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church and facilitated their child's participation in the same. This individual attended Mass, and brought their minor child to Mass, on more than fifty percent of Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation each year and continued this practice until at least the time of the CPSA disclosure.
3. Minor Child and Childhood: The period in time from birth through the end of age seventeen.
4. Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse: Unwanted, non-consensual sexual contact of any kind that is initiated or perpetrated by an ordained priest, bishop, cardinal or the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church.
5. Disclosure of Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse: Any report of being sexually abused by clergy that is conveyed verbally, in writing, or through a third party by the adult child to the mother.
6. Previous Disclosure: Implies that one calendar year has passed between the disclosure and the study interviews and that the participant is no longer predominantly in the immediate crisis period following the disclosure.

Statement of Assumptions

Based on my personal and professional experiences, as well as the review of the literature, I made the following four assumptions as I began my study.

1. The distinctiveness of the Roman Catholic belief system complicates practicing Roman Catholics' ability to cope with and make meaning of the clergy sexual abuse that was

perpetrated on their child. Therefore, for practicing Catholics, clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of children is a unique betrayal.

2. Mothers are uniquely affected by the disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. This assumption is based on a study by Manion et al. (1996) that found that mothers of sexually abused children, when compared to mothers of non-abused children, experienced more emotional distress and had poorer general functioning than did fathers after the abuse was disclosed.
3. The ability to make meaning of a clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure evolves over time and is different after the initial crisis period.
4. Participants who volunteer for this study may have had different lived experiences since the disclosure than those who are not willing to volunteer for such a study.

Theoretical Perspective and Epistemological Foundation of the Project

This study sought to elucidate the lived experiences of practicing, or formerly practicing Catholic mothers who had an adult child who has disclosed clergy-perpetrated childhood sexual abuse. To accomplish this goal, I employed the theoretical and epistemological frameworks of hermeneutics and of social constructionism. As described by Crotty (1998), a theoretical frame is typically a lens through which phenomena are viewed or interpreted. An epistemology is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature, origin and limits of human knowledge. The definitions and boundaries between the two are often fluid and subject to philosophical debate that is beyond the scope of this project. Thus, in the context of this study, I will note that, generally, social constructionism is embedded in hermeneutics, and I used the concepts of

epistemology and *theoretical perspective* interchangeably. Finally, the lens of psychoanalytic theory further informed my understanding of the data collected.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that addresses the question, "What do we know and how do we know it?" (C. Cutrone, personal communication, August 28, 2021). Hermeneutics, generally, is an epistemology that deals with this fundamental question through interpretation and an emphasis on the role of language. However, and as relevant to this study, Hoffman (2009) suggested that in psychoanalysis and the study of humans, the epistemological question is not only about "what we know and how we know it," but also involves the question of how we can construct meaning from ambiguous human experience, while embracing "the existential uncertainty that accompanies the realization that there are multiple good ways to be" (p. 1045). Further, we need to answer the question of how we can develop understanding while recognizing that our interpretations are always influenced by culture, personal values, and social or political contexts.

Hoffman (2009) argued that an attitude that "requires responsible, creative, improvised, and collaborative efforts on the parts of the participants to make something of the ambiguous, context-dependent reality that evolves in the course of their interaction" (p. 1044) is needed and that a non-objectivist hermeneutic paradigm is particularly well-suited for understanding complex human experiences. This stance embraces the existential uncertainty inherent in studying human phenomena. In contrast to positivistic assumptions, hermeneutics assumes there is not an objective or single truth that is being sought out, but instead is concerned with the interpretation and understanding of meaning. This approach acknowledges that choices in interpretation are always influenced by culture, sociopolitical mindset, personal values, and other

factors in ways that can never be fully known. Further, the meanings we create, based on our experiences, are not always obvious. Researchers must dive deeply into accounts of lived experience in order to approach these individually constructed meanings rather than relying on empirical observation (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

In keeping with this idea, I used multiple in-depth interviews with a small number of participants to immerse myself into their experiences pertaining to their adult child's disclosure of CPSA. This study's focus on in-depth individual cases aligned with Hoffman's (2009) argument for the scientific legitimacy of case studies in understanding human experience. As he noted, the "consequential uniqueness" (p. 1049) of each person's experience made the individual case study especially suited for advancing knowledge. While systematic empirical research often attempts to extricate individuals from their life contexts, case studies allow us to examine how people are "essentially embedded in sociocultural, economic-political and developmental life-contexts" (Orlinsky, 2006, as cited in Hoffman, 2009, p. 1063).

In alignment with this position, I also used a social constructionist worldview. A social constructionist stance uses the ideas of Gergen (2009) and emphasizes that all knowledge, including our understanding of self and reality, is fundamentally constructed through social relationships and language. For Gergen, our ways of describing and explaining the world are derived from our relationships rather than from so-called objective observations of reality. Thus, even our most basic understandings are products of social processes. Since there are so many and varied understandings and meanings that may be developed, it was important that the researcher considered their complexity and kept to the participant's perceptions of their own experience.

Finally, it may be argued that to use a psychoanalytic lens is to search for meaning, rather than objective truth and that psychoanalysis is, indeed, a "hermeneutic discipline." Rather than "knowledge-generation," the psychoanalytic aim becomes "meaning-generation" (Hinshelwood, 2013, p. 80). Likewise, this study sought to understand not only the lived experiences of the participants, but also the ways in which each participant has made meaning of her experience with her adult child's disclosure of CPSA. The use of a psychoanalytic lens acknowledges the existence and importance of each individual's psychic life, while recognizing that this inner life exists always in conjunction with other individuals, culture, society, and institutions, including religious beliefs and religious institutions. As Hoffman (2009) emphasizes, this approach "requires responsible, creative, improvised, and collaborative efforts on the parts of the participants *to make something* of the ambiguous, context-dependent reality that evolves in the course of their interaction" (p. 1044). Rather than seeking to establish universal truths, this study aimed to generate what Hoffman (2009) called "important plausible possibilities" (p. 1046) that enriched my understanding of these mothers' experiences.

This study used a Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology (Tolleson, 1996) which was framed by hermeneutic and social constructionist epistemological stances. The combination of hermeneutic, social constructionist, and psychoanalytic approaches allowed for a "critical, nonconformist" (Hoffman, 2009, p. 1043) stance in which I strove to understand the participants' experiences and their meanings for each individual. This integrated framework acknowledged that while there are multiple valid ways to understand experience, not all interpretations of the data collected are equally valid. The findings were grounded in the data while remaining sensitive to each participant's individual circumstances. This approach allowed the uniqueness of

each mother's experience and the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shaped their meaning-making processes to be acknowledged. In sum, and as Stolorow, Atwood and Orange (1999) so eloquently wrote:

> The claim that all psychoanalytic understanding is interpretative means that there are no decontextualized absolutes or universals, no neutral or objective [researchers], no immaculate perceptions, and no God's-eye views of anything or anyone. But it does not mean that we abandon the search for truth, for lived experience, for subjective reality. (p. 387)

Foregrounding

"Elizabeth, my stomach is just rolling today, it's just rolling. I can't stay on the phone," said a patient, whom I will call "Maggie." These words were the last I would ever hear her utter, the culmination of several years of two sessions per week. Maggie had eschewed all medical care after learning that she had what may have been a curable cancer and she allowed herself to slowly die. This act was in reaction to her adult son's untimely death, which occurred just a few years after he disclosed that he had been brutally sexually abused by a Roman Catholic priest during his early adolescence.

My Irish Catholic last name has attracted many Catholic patients who are considering psychotherapy. Some of them have either peripherally or directly experienced clergy abuse. My mental rolodex of patients, however, seems to be perpetually opened up to Maggie's card. I have previously written about her (Sullivan, 2026) and presented her in more supervision sessions than any other patient. I cannot locate myself in my present research without acknowledging the profound effect her experiences with CPSA have had on me.

I was raised in a practicing Catholic household and my childhood consisted of unwavering attendance at Sunday Mass. I spent third through twelfth grade at an all-girls Catholic school. My relationship with my childhood religion has always been conflictual. I respect those for whom it provides solace and peace, but it is a leap of faith that I have never been able to genuinely make. I have always been interested in the question of why some people have such unwavering faith and some, like myself, never seem to be able to find something within the Church to latch onto.

In keeping with the postmodern turn, I believe that my biases cannot truly be bracketed and that my subjectivity existed in the room as I interviewed the study participants and analyzed the findings. That is, my "values, personal history, and 'position' on characteristics such as gender, culture, class, and age are inescapable elements of the inquiry" (Haverkamp, 2005, p. 147). As I progressed through the stages of this study, I was cautious to not frame the experiences of the participants from my own point of view.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review examined the scholarly work relevant to understand the lived experiences of practicing Roman Catholic mothers whose adult children have disclosed childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse (CPSA). This review integrated the literature from several fields to establish a foundation for this study's research questions. This review covers both what has been previously published and identifies gaps in the research literature.

At the intersection of religious studies, trauma theory, family systems theory, and psychoanalytic thought is the phenomenon of how practicing Catholic mothers may experience, interpret, and navigate their adult children's disclosures of CPSA. The Catholic Church's unique structure and doctrine shapes both how clergy abuse occurs and how it is experienced by victims and their families. These factors merge with family systems and cultural expectations of Catholic mothers and create a multi-layered context within which mothers may make meaning of their child's clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Given that this project employed a Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology (Tolleson, 1996), psychoanalytic perspectives were integrated throughout this literature review. Psychoanalytic theory helps to understand the psychological processes involved in clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, institutional responses, and family functioning following disclosure. As Frawley-O'Dea (2007) argued, psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, object relations, and defense mechanisms are quite useful to understand the extent of the violation that occurs when Catholic clergy exploit their positions. The inclusion of psychoanalytic perspectives was

also consistent with this study's methodological approach as this research study sought to understand conscious experiences as well as unconscious processes.

As stated in chapter one, a psychoanalytic lens was used to search for meaning, rather than objective truth. This psychoanalytic foundation was fundamental to understand the complexity of each participant's experiences. Specifically, psychoanalytic concepts such as object relations, transference, countertransference, and theories about not-knowing are valuable ideas to use to examine the unconscious dynamics that affect Catholic mothers' experiences. For example, object relations theory could explain how a mother's internalized representations of Catholic authority figures could complicate her response when she learned that her child was harmed by clergy. The concept of splitting could explain how some mothers maintain their religious devotion while they process their child's abuse by clergy, as they keep "good" and "bad" aspects of the Church psychologically separate. Similarly, defense mechanisms such as denial, rationalization, or intellectualization might function not only at individual levels but within family systems and religious communities, and create complex barriers that prevent awareness of clergy abuse. These psychoanalytic ideas guided my exploration of Catholic mothers' conscious and unconscious meaning-making processes after their child's disclosure.

Throughout this review, I sought to establish the scholarly context that informed my research questions about the lived experiences of practicing Catholic mothers after they learn of their adult child's prior childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. More specifically, I was interested in how their relationship to the Catholic Church was affected, the effects of disclosure on the mother-child relationship, the intrapsychic processes mothers used to cope, and how their ability to make meaning evolved over time. As I considered perspectives from multiple domains,

I identified the gaps of current understanding and established the necessity of this research project.

Catholic Church Structure, Doctrine, and Authority

Historical and Theological Foundations of the Catholic Priesthood and Authority

The Catholic Church's hierarchical structure and theological framework create unique power structures that are central to understand the context of CPSA and its impact on the direct victims and their families. In what follows, I synthesized research on how the ideas within Catholic doctrine, historical developments, and organizational practices intersected to create a unique environment within which CPSA occurs and is experienced.

The historical development of the Catholic priesthood has established a power differential that has consequences for Catholic communities. Since the Council of Trent in the 1500s, clear boundaries between clergy and laity separated priests into a formal hierarchical system (Cameli, 2019) that conferred authority over practicing Catholics beyond the clergy's liturgical functions. The theological concept of *apostolic succession* positioned priests as inheritors of Christ's authority through an unbroken line of ordination from the apostles, and created, what Keenan (2013) described as, a sacred power differential between clergy and laity. Küng (2003) and Doyle and Rubino (2004) observed how this theological framing positioned priests as mediators between God and the faithful, and in which priests hold a sacred and paternal role based on trust and power.

These structural and theological elements include the concept of *alter Christus*, which positions the priest as "another Christ" during sacramental functions (Frawley-O'Dea, 2018; Guido, 2008). This theological perspective elevated priests to a divine status that is above

ordinary human relationships (Doyle, 2003), and created complex power hierarchies in which questioning the behavior of a priest could be interpreted as questioning divine authority itself (Keenan, 2013). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this theological position facilitated powerful transference-like dynamics, in which priests became symbolic parent figures invested with both earthly and heavenly paternal authority (Frawley-O'Dea, 2007).

The results of these religious power structures created both risk factors for abuse and barriers to appropriate responses when abuse occurs. When priests are viewed mainly through the lens of their sacred role rather than their human limitations, communities develop blind spots regarding inappropriate behavior (Formicola, 2004). These blind spots, combined with deference to clergy, created what White and Terry (2008) identified as *opportunity structures* (p. 663) for abuse that are uniquely reinforced by Catholic teachings.

Intersection of Theological, Practical, and Psychological Dimensions

The Catholic Church's distinctive characteristics thus created an intersection of theological, practical, and psychological dimensions that fundamentally shape how clergy abuse occurs, is experienced, and is disclosed. Sacraments created particular areas of vulnerability, especially during rituals like confession, which establish private encounters between priests and parishioners, including children as young as eight years old (Byrne, 2010). Catholic sacraments are controlled by strict theological rules, such as the seal of confession, that may conflict with civil reporting requirements.

At the same time, the requirement of celibacy, when combined with male-only clergy, created gendered power structures that influence institutional responses to abuse. While celibacy itself does not cause abusive behavior, inadequate preparation for celibate living combined with

isolation from general society could contribute to unhealthy coping mechanisms (Sipe, 1995). These structural elements connect to the concept of *clericalism*, which is excessive deference to clergy and their opinions, and has been identified as a serious risk factor by both researchers and Catholic leadership (Doyle & Rubino, 2004; Esteves, 2019).

These conditions are particularly important to understand how clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse affects victims and families. Crisp (2004) described how sacramental rituals establish deep emotional and spiritual bonds in Catholic communities, thus violations within these contexts are particularly traumatic. For abuse survivors, the intimate connection between religious rituals and traumatic experiences creates what Doyle (2011) termed *spiritual trauma,* which goes beyond psychological harm and affects fundamental aspects of religious identity and spiritual well-being.

For practicing Catholic mothers specifically, these religious aspects create levels of complexity when they learn of their child's abuse. The violation goes beyond their child to the entire family system, and particularly affects parents who facilitated their child's relationship with the Church and its representatives (Guido, 2008). Catholic mothers, often responsible for their children's religious formation (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994), might find their own religious identity implicated in the abuse in ways that increase feelings of guilt (Fogler et al., 2008a), shame, and spiritual disorientation. This understanding of clergy abuse, as both personal and spiritual betrayal, helped explain why Catholic mothers could become susceptible to particularly profound secondary trauma (Cyr et al., 2016; Kilroy et al., 2014) following disclosure. When abuse occurs within church settings, these variables can cause spiritual conflicts and identity issues for Catholic mothers (Crisp, 2004; Doyle, 2009; McDannell, 2023).

Psychoanalytic Understandings of Clergy Identity and Community Dynamics

Psychoanalytic theory provides a lens to help understand the unconscious mechanisms that shape clerical identity formation and clergy-community relationships in ways that contribute to both abuse patterns and institutional responses. Rather than seeing CPSA as simply an individual pathology, psychoanalytic perspectives illuminate how clerical identity formation, institutional dynamics, and community relationships created complex psychological conditions that both enable abuse and complicate responses to disclosure.

Object relations theory revealed how seminary formation traditionally encouraged fusion of personal identity with the idealized role of being a priest, and potentially allows for splitting in which human limitations, such as sexuality, are dissociated from constructed clerical identity (Frawley-O'Dea, 2007). When this splitting occurs, clergy might compartmentalize abusive behaviors as separate from their "true" priestly identity, which contributes to patterns of denial and minimization that are frequently observed in clergy offenders (Doyle & Rubino, 2004).

Narcissistic vulnerabilities might be both attracted to and reinforced by clerical roles, as Celenza (2004) demonstrated. Individuals with a fragile sense of self may be drawn to the priesthood for its ability to provide an identity that is constructed through institutional and community validation. This situation creates what Meloy (1986) identified as *narcissistic psychopathology* in some clergy, in which the priestly role served to regulate self-esteem rather than meet community needs.

Within Catholic communities, the concepts of transference and countertransference show psychological bonds between clergy and parishioners. Traditional Catholic spirituality encouraged transference-like relationships where priests became symbolic parent figures invested with paternal authority (Frawley-O'Dea, 2007). These transference-like dynamics

created powerful psychological bonds that can be exploited in abusive relationships and complicate both disclosure and healing. In other words, it is a unique situation when an idealized object betrays the trust of someone vulnerable (K. McMahon, personal communication, May 17, 2025).

Dale and Alpert (2007) described how entire parishes may develop shared idealization of clergy that resists contradictory information about misconduct. This common defense serves community needs for stability and security, but creates institutional betrayal trauma when clergy-perpetrated abuse is revealed. The ensuing disillusionment affects not only direct victims but the larger faith community, explaining why parish membership declines following abuse revelations.

These psychoanalytic perspectives illustrate how clergy abuse originates not only from individual pathology but from interactions between Catholic theology, institutional structures, and intrapsychic dynamics. For Catholic mothers coping with their adult child's abuse disclosure, these conditions produce special challenges as they attempt to reconcile their religious identity with the reality of institutional betrayal.

Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse: Historical Patterns, Prevalence, and Institutional Responses

Historical Development and Systemic Patterns

The crisis of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse in the Catholic Church demonstrates a complex systemic pattern created by institutional factors, historical developments, and cultural settings. Although cases of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse have occurred throughout Church history, the issue received considerable attention through a series of revelations that began in the 1980s. The 1984 Louisiana case involving Gilbert Gauthe (Doyle & Rubino, 2004) revealed not

only individual abuse but also the institutional pattern of transferring accused priests to other parishes. Later, institutional factors were identified in the Boston Archdiocese by The Boston Globe, which uncovered how Church leadership had knowingly reassigned priests accused of abuse to different parishes without informing communities (Boston Globe Spotlight Team, 2002). These cases revealed institutional patterns that enabled continued abuse.

The global scope of these patterns became obvious as similar cases emerged worldwide, including in Ireland, Australia, Germany, Chile, and many other countries. Allegations extend over decades, from the 1950s through the present day (Doyle & Rubino, 2004). As these patterns occurred across the globe, institutional rather than merely individual factors became obvious.

Prevalence, Demographics, and Risk Factors

The empirical data on clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse revealed distinctive patterns that distinguish it from other forms of child sexual abuse. According to the comprehensive John Jay Report, 4,392 clerics, or approximately 4 percent of active clergy, were accused of childhood sexual abuse in the United States between 1950 and 2004, with a total of 10,667 allegations (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Terry, 2015). These numbers likely underestimate the true extent of abuse due to non-reporting and other barriers to disclosure (Guido, 2008).

Demographic analysis showed notable gender patterns that distinguish CPSA from other forms of child sexual abuse. Research comparing child sexual abuse in different settings found significantly higher prevalence of abuse by religious perpetrators for male victims (0.8%) than female victims (0.1%). This statistic was the reverse of typical gender distribution in overall child sexual abuse statistics (Hunt et al., 2024). This gender disparity aligned with findings from

the John Jay Report, in which the majority of reported victims were male adolescents (Terry et al., 2011).

The intersection of this data with institutional factors revealed the ways in which structural elements created conditions that enabled abuse patterns. Administrative responses to allegations showed patterns throughout dioceses and countries, including transferring accused priests rather than removing them from ministry, and giving priority to institutional reputation over victim welfare through confidential settlements with nondisclosure agreements. Further, CPSA was treated as a personal moral failure rather than a crime. Finally, the Church has continually shown a reluctance to cooperate with civil authorities (Formicola, 2014; Terry et al., 2011).

These patterns cannot be understood as simply the failures of individual leaders but represent organizational defenses that focused on institutional preservation instead of victim protection. As Smith and Freyd (2013) documented, this institutional betrayal significantly exacerbated the psychological harm experienced by survivors. For Catholic mothers whose children were abused by clergy, these institutional failures represent an additional layer of betrayal beyond the individual perpetrator's actions.

Institutional Reforms and Continuing Challenges

Institutional responses to the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse crisis evolved substantially since widespread public attention began in the early 2000s, though implementation has been uneven and problems continue. Major reforms have included the 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People adopted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which created guidelines for preventing abuse, reporting allegations, and providing healing for victims

(U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018). Pope Francis introduced changes to Church law, which included making sexual abuse, grooming minors, possessing child pornography, and covering up abuse criminal offenses under Vatican law. Additionally, in December 2019, he abolished the *pontifical secret* for abuse cases, which had previously maintained confidentiality in Church investigations (Aleteia, 2024).

In spite of these reforms, implementation has been inconsistent across dioceses and countries, and structural challenges persist. The hierarchical system of Church governance, combined with variations in civil law across jurisdictions, creates an uneven application of policies. Additionally, these reforms have focused primarily on stopping future abuse rather than comprehensively addressing the needs of victims and their families. These institutional dynamics, then, create a complex context for Catholic mothers whose adult children disclose historical clergy abuse. They have to manage not only their personal and family responses to the disclosure, but also an evolving institutional landscape that carries the legacy of institutional betrayal.

Understanding Institutional Abuse in Religious Environments

The Intersection of Power, Authority, and Vulnerability

Institutional abuse, in general, shares common characteristics that help illuminate the particular dynamics of clergy-perpetrated abuse. I examined how general patterns of institutional abuse manifest in the specific context of religious organizations. Across institutional settings, power imbalances created a vulnerability for abuse. The MEND Project (2023) documented how authority figures exploited this unevenness when institutions fail to implement adequate checks on power. In religious environments, these factors were intensified by religious beliefs that invest

authority figures with divine significance and added spiritual dimensions to existing power differentials. This theological reinforcement of authority created what Keenan (2013) identifies as *sacred power*, which is particularly resistant to challenge or oversight.

Institutional silencing mechanisms represent another common characteristic across settings, though they take specific forms in religious institutional contexts. Morrison and Milliken's (2003) analysis of organizational silencing demonstrated how institutions deployed various tactics, from explicit threats to subtle discouragement, to prevent disclosure of abuse. In religious environments, these mechanisms frequently incorporated concepts such as forgiveness, reconciliation, and institutional loyalty which created additional barriers to disclosure and accountability (Guerzoni & Graham, 2020).

The priority of institutional reputation over individual welfare emerged consistently across cases of institutional abuse but takes on distinctive dimensions in religious organizations. As Crofts (2016) described, concern for public image frequently drove institutional responses more than victim welfare considerations. In faith-based contexts, this concern went beyond organizational reputation to include theological concerns about creating a scandal, or the potential undermining of faith among believers when misconduct is revealed. This additional dimension created special challenges for victims and families who seek acknowledgment and justice within religious settings.

Collective Trauma and Effects on Communities

Research repeatedly documented severe and often persistent impacts of institutional abuse on both direct victims and broader communities. Unlike abuse in other contexts, institutional abuse involved betrayal by both individuals and systems ostensibly designed for

protection. Wolfe et al. (2006) documented how this betrayal could produce complex trauma responses, including profound difficulties with trust, authority, and institutional engagement. Further, in a 2006 paper, de Tubert described how perversions that originate in the social milieu contribute to emotional suffering. One source of such social failure occurs when a system claims to uphold a value system, yet internally disregards and violates it. When abuse occurs within religious institutions, the community effect goes beyond the direct victims. Deetman et al. (2011) documented how entire communities could experience collective trauma and the deterioration of trust in religious institutions. This community-level impact can endure over generations.

Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Institutional Defenses

Psychoanalytic frameworks offered understandings of the unconscious mechanisms that shape institutional responses to abuse allegations. Rather than viewing institutional failures as simply the result of conscious decisions, these perspectives showed how unconscious processes direct organizational behavior in ways that enable abuse and resist change.

Institutional abuse frequently serves unconscious psychological functions beyond the conscious intentions of individual perpetrators or leaders. Hopper's (2012) work on trauma and organizational dynamics drew on object relations theory to explain how institutions develop unconscious defensive systems that both perpetuate abuse and resist change. These institutional defenses manifested in what Shupe (2008) described as systematic institutional denial, in which allegations are minimized, victims are discredited, and offenders are protected through transfers rather than removed from ministry.

Gardner (2022) applied Bion's theory of group dynamics to explain how church hierarchies developed unconscious defensive routines that emphasize institutional preservation

instead of victim protection. These unconscious defenses helped explain why even well-intentioned reforms might encounter resistance or be implemented inconsistently. Grasping these psychodynamic processes is necessary to understand the complex institutional responses that Catholic mothers might encounter if they pursue accountability or support following their adult children's abuse disclosures.

The Impact of Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse on Direct Victims

Psychological, Physical, and Developmental Consequences

The impact of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse on direct victims involves psychological, physical, and developmental sequelae that extend throughout the lifespan. I examined how these impacts create complicated challenges for victims and families. Research repeatedly documented severe psychological consequences for the victims of CPSA (Easton et al., 2019; Fogler et al., 2008a; Isely et al., 2008). These effects start with immediate disturbances in psychosocial functioning and low self-esteem after the abuse (Isely et al., 2008) and continue through adolescence with the development of self-defeating patterns that affect education, peer relationships, and intimate relationships (Fogler et al., 2008a). Long-term effects included poor sleep, suicidal ideation, anger, detachment from others, and compromised social, relational, and intrapsychic functioning during adulthood (Fogler et al., 2008b; Isely et al., 2008).

The religious context of CPSA created distinctive features in trauma responses. A systematic review by Ellis et al. (2022) found that survivors of religious abuse, including clergy abuse, frequently struggled with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) combined with what the authors call *religious trauma syndrome*. This condition is identified by symptoms similar to complex PTSD but with additional spiritual dimensions. These religious dimensions

included theological confusion, crisis of faith, and damaged capacity for spiritual trust and engagement (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018; Doyle 2009; Doyle 2011).

Physical manifestations of trauma among CPSA survivors included somatic symptoms such as chronic pain, gastrointestinal distress, and sleep disturbances at significantly higher rates in comparison to both the general population and survivors of non-clergy sexual abuse (Isely et al., 2008). Dressing et al. (2017) found that survivors of CPSA reported more severe physical health problems than other childhood sexual abuse survivors. This finding suggested unique somatization patterns related to the religious context of the abuse.

A particularly relevant finding to understand maternal experiences comes from Isely et al.'s (2008) study of male survivors, which found that all participants reported that "parental reverence for the sanctity and trustworthiness of the clerical state was powerfully transmitted" (p. 204) to them as children. This parental emphasis on clerical respect, often instilled primarily by mothers as family religious educators, created conditions that not just facilitated abuse but also complicated disclosure and healing. This finding revealed the complex position of Catholic mothers who unintentionally contributed to their children's vulnerability through their efforts to engage their children in the Catholic community.

Spiritual Trauma and Religious Identity Disruption

The spiritual dimension of CPSA created unique forms of harm that distinguish it from other types of sexual trauma. While all sexual abuse involves betrayal of trust, CPSA specifically violated sacred trust and disrupts victims' fundamental spiritual worldview (Guido, 2008). This spiritual dimension created distinctive challenges for both victims and their families, particularly mothers who, as stated above, often served as the primary religious educators in the family.

Recent research indicated that religious trauma is far more prevalent than previously acknowledged (Slade et al., 2023) and created considerable disruptions to both emotional health and intellectual functioning. These issues manifested as guilt, anxiety, depression, and cognitive errors such as black-and-white thinking patterns (Singh et al., 2024). Religious identity following CPSA exhibited complex patterns of response, with many victims abandoning their religious identity entirely while others differentiated between their spirituality and the institutional church (Benkert & Doyle, 2009). Oakley and Kinmond (2013) found that nearly 75% of adults reported feeling injured by a church experience. This finding illustrated the common nature of spiritual harm.

The concepts of *spiritual orphaning* and *spiritual betrayal* capture the unique spiritual damage caused by CPSA. Spiritual orphaning refers to being cut off from one's spiritual heritage and spiritual community following abuse (Doyle, 2009), and creates a strong feeling of spiritual homelessness. Spiritual betrayal describes the unique harm of being abused by someone perceived as God's representative. As Benkert and Doyle (2009) explained, clergy are understood in Catholic theology as acting *in persona Christi*, which created a context where abuse by clergy can be experienced as betrayal by God himself. Pargament et al. (2004) documented that this sense of divine betrayal correlated with poorer outcomes, in terms of recovery, and more severe trauma symptoms. This result suggests that the theological implications of CPSA created additional barriers to psychological healing.

The Multi-Layered Betrayal of Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse

Betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1996) provided a structure for conceptualizing the distinctive harms of CPSA, which involved multiple layers of betrayal that go beyond the

individual perpetrator. In religious milieus, dependency on authority figures has both practical and spiritual dimensions, and intensifies the betrayal aspect of the trauma (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Research by Wind et al. (2008) showed how clergy abuse created rippling effects of betrayal throughout families and communities.

The institutional response to CPSA allegations often constituted a second betrayal that compounds the first trauma. Investigations documented patterns of institutional denial, victim-blaming, and protection of perpetrators that characterized many diocesan responses to abuse allegations. According to the MHG study (Dressing et al., 2019), these institutional responses significantly worsened long-term outcomes. Survivors who encountered dismissive or hostile institutional responses showed more severe and persistent trauma symptoms.

The communal dimension of CPSA created a third layer of betrayal when family members or faith communities side with perpetrators or institutions rather than victims. Flynn (2008) found that many women sexually abused by clergy were blamed and ignored by others in their parishes. This multi-layered betrayal by perpetrator, institution, and community distinguished CPSA from many other forms of sexual trauma and helped explain its often devastating and long-lasting impact.

For Catholic mothers whose adult children disclose CPSA, these results carry considerable implications. They have to manage not only their child's trauma and its effects on family relationships as well as their own complex relationship with the religious institution that facilitated harm. Comprehending these multi-layered betrayals is necessary to understand the particular challenges that face Catholic mothers in the aftermath of there child's clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure.

Family Systems and Sexual Abuse Disclosure

Family systems theory provided a structure to understand how sexual abuse disclosure affects not only individuals but entire family systems. It also creates complex interactional patterns that shape both primary and secondary responses as well as long-term adaptation. Rather than viewing family members as separate individuals responding to disclosure, this perspective examined how families function as connected systems in which changes that affect one member inevitably impact others (Bowen, 1993).

Systemic Responses to Trauma and Disclosure

Recent research expanded this understanding by examining how the way family typically communicates specifically influences disclosure processes and subsequent healing (Alaggia et al., 2019). Celik et al. (2022) identified that family systems following abuse disclosure often experienced boundary disruptions, role confusion, and communication issues that can either facilitate or impede healing. This research demonstrated that abuse occurs within relational contexts which affect both the perpetration of abuse and responses to its disclosure.

When applied to clergy-perpetrated abuse, family systems theory revealed how religious institutions often function as extended family systems with similar patterns of loyalty conflicts and defensive mechanisms (Dollahite et al., 2019). This insight helped explain why CPSA created particularly complex systemic dynamics, as families were compelled to manage relationships not only within their immediate system as well as with religious communities and institutions.

Research on family dynamics following abuse disclosure revealed diverse patterns of adaptation. Mauny et al. (2023) found that disclosure often made family systems fragile,

reactivated intergenerational trauma, and disrupted familial relationships. However, Fong et al. (2020) found variable outcomes, with some families experiencing worsening relationships while others reported increased cohesion following disclosure. These variable outcomes suggested that contextual factors, including religious beliefs and institutional responses, greatly impact how families adapt to abuse disclosure.

Sibling Relationships and Family Roles

The impact of sexual abuse disclosure reached beyond parent-child relationships to affect sibling relationships as well as broader family dynamics. Despite limited research on siblings' experiences, current research revealed important patterns that help explain family adaptation to abuse disclosure. Crabtree et al. (2021) found that non-abused adult siblings of childhood sexual abuse survivors (the authors' term) experienced both personal and relational effects, including ongoing issues that arose from their sibling's abuse. McElvaney et al. (2022) documented emotional reactions among adult siblings following disclosure, including relationship strain and pressure to manage family dynamics. Schreier et al. (2017) identified conflicting feelings among siblings, including anger and resentment toward the abused sibling as well as urges to protect them.

These outcomes are relevant to understand Catholic family systems affected by clergy abuse. In Catholic families, in which religious participation commonly involves the entire family unit, clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of one child creates consequences throughout the system. Wind et al. (2008) found that CPSA disclosure affected multiple family relationships, including sibling relationships, parent relationships, and parent-adult child relationships, as well as impacting family members' religious practices.

For Catholic mothers who navigate their adult children's clergy abuse disclosures, these factors suggested that they had to manage not only their own responses and their relationship with the disclosing child, but also the reactions and needs of other family members. This multi-directional responsibility creates additional complexity in their experience of disclosure and its aftermath.

Silence, Secrecy, and Institutional Reinforcement

Silence, secrecy, and denial functioned as powerful mechanisms in family systems affected by sexual abuse. They functioned not only as individual psychological defenses but as systemic patterns that maintained family homeostasis at the expense of individual healing. Caprioli and Crenshaw (2017) identified three primary forms of silence which emerged in families following abuse disclosure: protective silence, or attempting to shield family members from painful information; imposed silence, which is explicitly or implicitly prohibiting discussion; and traumatic silence, that is, the inability to verbalize experiences due to trauma responses.

In cases of clergy-perpetrated abuse, these family patterns of silence and secrecy were commonly reinforced by institutional silence. Guerzoni and Graham (2020) documented how Catholic Church communications reinforced silence and secrecy and facilitated denial by misappropriating the religious concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation in order to maintain silence. This institutional reinforcement of silence represented further betrayal and created additional barriers to healing for both direct victims and their families.

Cunnington and Clark (2023) studied adults who attempted to disclose childhood sexual abuse to family members and identified several neutralization techniques that family members

used to reinforce silence. These techniques included denial of responsibility, denial of harm, victim blaming, and questioning authority. All are mechanisms that allow continued loyalty to a group without recognition or acknowledgement of the abuse that occurred within it. In Catholic contexts, where institutional loyalty may be particularly strong, these mechanisms could be reinforced by religious concepts that emphasize forgiveness over justice.

These patterns of silence and secrecy had important consequences for Catholic mothers whose adult child disclosed childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. They were obliged to manage not only their own emotions, but also the collective and institutional pressures that discourage open acknowledgment and discussion of the abuse. It was necessary to recognize these dynamics in order to understand the difficult challenges these mothers faced to support their child and to manage their own religious identities and community relationships.

Parental Experiences of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure

The Complicated Nature of Parental Responses

Research repeatedly demonstrated that parental responses to child sexual abuse disclosure are varied and an evolving process that are affected by multiple factors. For example, Elliott and Carnes (2001) identified how parental responses ranged along a spectrum from immediate belief and support to doubt, blame, or hostility toward the child. The literature identified several intersecting factors that influence parental responses, including the relationship with the perpetrator, severity of abuse, prior family dynamics, cultural components, and the parents' own trauma histories. When disclosure involves abuse perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the family, reactions tended to be more complicated and possibly more negative when compared

to abuse by strangers (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). This pattern had particular relevance for CPSA cases, where perpetrators are not only known but also revered.

McElvaney and Nixon (2020) documented how parents navigated competing demands following disclosure. These demands included supporting their child, managing their own emotions, and interacting with various systems such as legal, medical, and social services. This research illustrated the multidimensional nature of parental experience, where affective, practical, and relational demands created complicated challenges.

Studies of adults who delayed disclosure until adulthood revealed that fear of parental rejection and denial were primary factors in this delay (Palmer et al., 1999; Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001). Hershkowitz et al. (2007) found that half of the children interviewed reported shame or fear about their parents' responses, with 63% of parents demonstrating unsupportive reactions. These results suggested that children's fears about parental responses were often based in reality, showing the necessity to understand and address barriers to supportive parental reactions.

Psychological Effects and Secondary Trauma

Parents of children who disclosed sexual abuse often experienced profound psychological distress that shares features with direct trauma exposure. Rather than viewing parental distress as simply reactive, recent studies often conceptualized it as secondary or vicarious trauma (Willcott-Benoit & Cummings, 2024; Willcott-Benoit & Cummings, 2025) that could considerably impact parents' functioning and well-being. Shame and guilt emerged consistently as core psychological experiences for parents following abuse disclosure. McElvaney and Nixon (2020) documented how parents experienced intense guilt for not protecting their child and

shame about the abuse occurring. This self-blame manifested as intrusive, persistent rumination that undermined parents' sense of competence and worth (Kilroy et al., 2014). For parents of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse victims, these feelings might be intensified by the religious significance of having facilitated their child's relationship with the perpetrator.

Secondary or vicarious trauma among parents manifested in symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, including intrusive thoughts, emotional numbing, hyper-vigilance, and sleep disturbances (Cyr et al., 2018; Kilroy et al., 2014; Manion et al., 1996). These traumatic responses could impair parents' emotional availability to support their child effectively (Cyr et al., 2018; van Toledo & Seymour, 2013). Kilroy et al. (2014) identified what they termed *systemic trauma* affecting parents, noting that they experienced both vicarious trauma related to their child's experiences and direct traumatization from interactions with legal, child protection, and mental health systems.

Recent work by Willcott-Benoit and Cummings (2024, 2025) expanded understanding of how parents process and potentially grow from their children's trauma disclosures. Their research examined vicarious traumatization and vicarious post-traumatic growth in caregivers indirectly exposed to their children's interpersonal trauma and offered ways to understand how parents handled the physical and mental health impacts of indirect trauma exposure. Their 2025 study examined how parents centered their child's traumatic event in their lives post-disclosure and provided perspectives on the complex ways parents are affected by their children's traumas.

These results had particular relevance to understand the experiences of Catholic mothers whose adult children disclose clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. The religious context of the abuse might create additional aspects of secondary trauma related to spiritual betrayal and identity

conflict. Acknowledging the broader consequences of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse is fundamental in order to develop appropriate support interventions for these mothers.

Maternal Perspectives and Experiences

Next, I synthesized findings specific to maternal experiences to provide context to understand Catholic mothers' responses to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosures. Mothers typically served as primary recipients of child sexual abuse disclosures. Hershkowitz et al. (2007) found that 35.6% of children first disclosed to their mother, which was significantly more than to any other family member. This pattern continued with adult disclosures, where mothers remain primary recipients of delayed disclosures (Tener & Murphy, 2015). This position as primary disclosure recipient created a particular responsibility for both support of the victim and possible secondary trauma.

Psychological research indicated that mothers experienced more severe distress following childhood sexual abuse disclosure compared to fathers. Manion et al. (1996) found that mothers of sexually abused children experienced greater overall emotional distress, poorer family functioning, and lower satisfaction in their parenting role compared to fathers. These gender differences likely reflected both the intrapsychic factors and sociocultural expectations that positioned mothers as primary protectors and nurturers.

Contemporary research moved past binary classifications of maternal responses as either "supportive" or "non-supportive" to recognize their multidimensional nature. Maternal response encompasses emotional reactions, such as belief, validation, empathy, behavioral responses, for example, protection or seeking services, and attitude changes toward the perpetrator, the child, or

the institution (Zajac et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2010). These dimensions may fail to align and could create complex and sometimes contradictory response patterns.

Research on adult disclosures of childhood abuse revealed additional complexities in maternal experiences. When abuse is disclosed years or decades after it occurred, mothers simultaneously experienced fresh trauma while processing the realization that the abuse happened long ago. This dimension created complex guilt about not having known or protected their child at the time (Tener & Murphy, 2015). For mothers of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse victims specifically, this retrospective guilt might be especially intense given their role in assisting their child's involvement with the Church and clergy.

Longitudinal research indicated that maternal response was a dynamic process rather than a static reaction. Initial shock and ambivalence often evolved toward greater acceptance, belief, and support as mothers process the disclosure (Cyr et al., 2016; McElvaney & Nixon, 2020). However, this evolution might be complicated in CPSA cases by institutional responses that stress protection of the Church instead of answerability and healing (Doyle, 2009; Fogler et al., 2008a; Guerzoni & Graham, 2015).

Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Maternal Response

The experiences of mothers whose children have been sexually abused must be understood within wider cultural settings which shape maternal identity, expectations, and responses. For Catholic mothers specifically, religious teachings created distinctive expectations that influenced how they interpreted and responded to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosures. Across many cultures, including Western societies where Catholicism has been historically influential, mothers were positioned as primary protectors and nurturers of children

(Elliott & Carnes, 2001). This cultural script of *the good mother* created expectations that mothers should inherently know when their children are in danger and prevent harm (Bolen & Lamb, 2004). When harm occurs despite a mother's best efforts, it triggers profound guilt and self-blame that complicates the process of supporting an abused child (Kilroy et al., 2014).

Within Catholic teachings specifically, the maternal role carried sacred significance that intensified these cultural expectations. The Catechism of the Catholic Church emphasizes that parents, particularly mothers, bear responsibility for evangelizing their children and integrating all aspects of family life with the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994). Catholic theology elevated motherhood through Marian devotion, positioning Mary as the pure, selfless, and perfectly nurturing ideal mother (Kucer, 2020). This idealized maternal model creates standards that could increase feelings of failure and inadequacy when a child is harmed, mainly within church contexts.

These religious expectations created precise challenges for Catholic mothers responding to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosures. They were obliged to manage not only their child's trauma and their own secondary trauma but also complex religious identity conflicts and community pressures. Perceiving these cultural and religious dimensions was needed to understand the full complexity of Catholic mothers' experiences following their adult children's clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosures.

Gaps in the Literature and Research Needs

The Absence of Studies on Mothers of CPSA Victims

Despite extensive research on various aspects of clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse, significant gaps existed in understanding the experiences of those affected other than the direct

victims. Most notably, studies focusing on the experiences of parents, much less mothers, whose children were abused by clergy are notably scarce. This gap was particularly surprising given the two roles potentially experienced by Catholic mothers, who commonly serve as primary spiritual nurturers while also being members of the institutional church within which the abuse was perpetrated.

Existing research on non-offending parents focused primarily on sexual abuse broadly, without the specific context of clergy perpetration (Bolen & Gergely, 2014; Elliott & Carnes, 2001). This research focused on the parents' experience in terms of how it affected the child's disclosure and healing rather than exploring parental experiences as important in their own right. While these studies provided important awareness of general parental responses to child sexual abuse disclosure, they failed to capture the unique dimensions of clergy-perpetrated abuse, in which the perpetrator holds a position of trust and also represents divine authority. Comprehending the specific experiences of mothers whose child was abused by clergy is important for developing appropriate support interventions and policy responses. The absence of research on this population amounts to a significant gap in both scholarly knowledge and in real-world applications for supporting families affected by clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Adult Disclosure and Long-Term Impact

A second significant gap concerns the lack of research on parental experiences following adult disclosures of childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse and the long-term psychological, spiritual, and relational impacts on parents of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse victims. Most studies on parental responses focused on cases in which the abuse is disclosed during childhood

(Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Hershkowitz et al., 2007), yet clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse was often disclosed years or even decades after the abuse occurred (Terry, 2015; Wind et al., 2008).

Adult disclosures created particular challenges for parents that remained largely unexplored. These problems included retrospective guilt about not recognizing signs of abuse, the need to reconcile current understanding with historical memories, and navigating relationships which had been formed within years of secrecy and trauma (Tener & Murphy, 2015). For Catholic mothers specifically, adult disclosures might require a review of decades of religious practices and beliefs.

While some research documented immediate and short-term parental responses to disclosure (Cyr et al., 2016; Manion et al., 1996), few studies examined how these impacts evolved over time. The longitudinal dimension was particularly important for understanding Catholic mothers' experiences, as they managed ongoing relationships with both their adult children and the institutional church. Without understanding of these long-term processes, support interventions might fail to attend to the shifting needs of mothers over time.

Meaning-Making and Religious Identity

A significant gap in the literature concerns the meaning-making processes of mothers following clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure and how Catholic identity specifically shapes maternal responses. Meaning-making, which is the cognitive and emotional process through which individuals make sense of stressful events and incorporate them into their present life, was central to recovery from these life events (Park, 2010). However, research examining how Catholic mothers construct meaning from their children's clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse experiences was virtually nonexistent.

This gap was particularly significant given the grave existential and spiritual questions raised by clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. Catholic mothers might find it difficult to reconcile their faith in God with the reality that representatives of God caused harm to their children. They might question their own parental competence and religious discernment, and their fundamental understanding of safety, trust, and spiritual authority might be disrupted (Fogler et al., 2008a). Understanding how Catholic mothers make meaning of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse was essential for producing effective therapeutic approaches which address the unique spiritual and existential dimensions of their experience (Walker et al., 2012).

Similarly, a significant need existed for research that deliberately examined how Catholic identity shapes maternal responses to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure. While some research explored the impact of religious beliefs on coping with trauma more generally (Bradley et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2012), few studies examined the specific intersection of Catholic maternal identity and responses to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. Catholic mothers occupy a unique position at the intersection of multiple identities: woman, mother, Catholic, and member of a parish community. Each aspect of these mothers carried particular cultural expectations, theological meanings, and social responsibilities that might shape how they interpreted and responded to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Methodological Implications and Future Directions

The identified gaps in the literature have considerable methodological ramifications for future research. Typical approaches that focused on breadth over depth, or that focused exclusively on quantifiable outcomes, were unlikely to capture the complex psychological, spiritual, and relational dimensions of Catholic mothers' experiences following clergy abuse

disclosure. The absence of studies focusing specifically on this population called for exploratory qualitative methodologies that could identify key themes and processes without imposing pre-determined frameworks.

Understanding meaning-making processes requires research methods that are able to access both conscious narratives and unconscious dimensions of experience. The Psychoanalytic Case Study approach used in this project directly addressed those methodological implications via concentration on depth, attention to both conscious and unconscious processes, and recognition of the unfolding of meaning over time. By conducting multiple in-depth interviews with a small sample of Catholic mothers, I aimed to generate rich data which revealed the complexity of maternal experiences following clergy-perpetrated abuse disclosures. I hoped that this project would begin to fill some of the identified gaps in the literature.

Conclusion

This literature review summarized scholarship across multiple domains to establish the context to understand the experiences of practicing Roman Catholic mothers whose adult children have disclosed clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse during their childhood. Rather than treating these domains as separate areas of inquiry, this review focused on their interconnections, demonstrating how Catholic Church structure and doctrine, institutional abuse dynamics, psychological ramifications on victims, family systems processes, and cultural expectations of mothers converged to create a unique context for maternal experiences of their adult child's clergy-perpetrated childhood sexual abuse disclosure.

The Catholic Church's hierarchical structure and the concepts of Catholic doctrine, such as *alter Christus* created distinctive power dynamics that both enable abuse and complicate its

disclosure and aftermath. For direct victims, clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse caused not only psychological and emotional harm as well as spiritual trauma that affects fundamental aspects of religious identity. The concept of *spiritual betrayal* stood out as especially significant, with clergy understood in Catholic theology as representatives of God, creating multi-layered betrayal which went beyond the individual perpetrator to include institutions and communities.

Family systems literature demonstrated that abuse disclosures fundamentally transformed family dynamics and that disclosure might trigger complex loyalty conflicts, particularly in religious families. Research on parental experiences revealed that mothers experience profound psychological distress, including secondary trauma, guilt, and shame. For Catholic mothers specifically, cultural and religious expectations of maternal perfection might intensify these responses.

Despite extensive research in related areas, significant gaps remained in understanding Catholic mothers' experiences when their adult children disclose childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. These gaps included the absence of studies focused specifically on mothers of CPSA victims, limited research on adult disclosures, insufficient longitudinal research on long-term consequences, inadequate exploration of meaning-making processes, and limited understanding of the overlap between Catholic identity and maternal responses. This review, thus, established both the scholarly context as well as the necessity of the current research to explore the unique experiences of practicing Catholic mothers whose adult children have disclosed clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

The Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology that was used in this project was uniquely suited to address these gaps through its concentration on depth rather than breadth, its attention

to both conscious and unconscious processes, and its recognition of the the elaborate connection between individual psychological experience and broader social contexts. By understanding how Catholic mothers made meaning of these experiences, navigate relationships with their children and the Church, and cope with psychological, emotional, and spiritual impacts, this study hoped to contribute valuable knowledge to both scholarly literature and clinical practice.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretative Psychoanalytic Case Study (Tolleson, 1996) was to describe and understand the individual subjective experience of practicing Roman Catholic mothers in the United States whose adult child or children have disclosed that they experienced clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse (CPSA) during their childhood. I hoped to understand how a small sample of these mothers navigated this experience, that is, how they made or did not make sense of this experience and whether and how the experience was transformative. Additionally, and more specifically, I considered the possible psychological and emotional impacts on mothers after they learned of their adult child's experience of childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse and whether the mother's relationship to the Catholic Church was affected by the disclosure. I was interested in how the mother's relationship to their adult child was, or was not, changed by the disclosure. I also explored the intrapsychic processes that were used to cope with the disclosure and its aftermath. Finally, I wished to understand how the mother's ability to handle or make meaning of the disclosure may or may not have evolved over time.

The remainder of this chapter presents further discussion of the methodology of the Psychoanalytic Case Study that I conducted. This discussion includes the rationale for the research design and epistemological frame. I also described the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the creation of the research sample and my approach to the research process. Then, I described the data collection and data analysis. I also considered ethical considerations, issues of

trustworthiness, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. Finally, I described my role and background as the researcher.

Rationale and Research Approach

As this study sought to elucidate the lived experience of practicing Catholic mothers whose adult child had disclosed clergy-perpetrated childhood sexual abuse, a qualitative research approach was appropriate. At this time, the study of this specific population was not reflected in the literature. Qualitative research is often utilized to explore and understand human experience, as it is an inductive style which builds "from data to themes" and focuses "on individual meaning, and emphasize[s] the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation" (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 5). Further, qualitative research has a "concern with lives in their historical, social, and cultural context, with an emphasis on the particularity of experience rather than a search for universal laws or generalized processes" (Haverkamp, 2005, p. 147). In keeping with a hermeneutic epistemology, this approach, a "nonobjectivist hermeneutic paradigm" (Hoffman, 2009, p. 1045), acknowledges that rather than discovering objective findings, there are meanings to be interpreted in a continuous process of understanding and contextualization (Hoffman, 2009). The suitability of qualitative research to understanding subjective meaning thus fulfilled the purpose of the study.

This project employed the theoretical perspective of hermeneutics. This philosophical stance emphasizes interpretation, the role of language, and assumes there is not an objective or single truth that is being sought out. Further, the meanings that are created, based on our experiences, are not always obvious and researchers must engage deeply with accounts of lived experience in order to approach these individually constructed subjective meanings (Smith &

Nizza, 2022). In accordance with this hermeneutic stance, I recognized that as both the participants and I attempted to develop an understanding of their experience of their child's clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure, any interpretations made of this experience would be influenced by our personal histories, cultures, values, and social contexts.

A social constructionist epistemology, as well as a social constructivist perspective, was embedded within this hermeneutic frame. Broadly, social constructionism is the view that "all knowledge, and therefore, all meaningful reality as such, is contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Put more simply, reality, "as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. There is no exception" (Crotty, 1998, p. 54). It is important to note that the terms "social constructionism" and "social constructivism" are often used interchangeably (Crotty, 1998). However, while these perspectives share common foundations, there are some distinctions in their focus. For the purpose of this study, the most important difference between constructionism and constructivism is that constructionism locates meaning-making primarily in social interactions and cultural processes, while constructivism places it within individual cognitive structures and personal interpretations of experience. In this sense, this project is both constructionistic and constructivistic as it acknowledges that meaning is created through both social and cultural interaction as well as through individual subjective meaning making. With this in mind and for simplicity, I used the two terms somewhat interchangeably.

As I met with each participant, I held such a stance. To use a constructivist stance is to "believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" and to

postulate that “individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 9). Since there are many and varied meanings that are developed, it was important that the researcher considered their complexity and kept to the participant’s perceptions of their experience and the constructionist researcher focused on the “specific contexts in which people live and work to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 9). I retained the awareness that in any given situation, there were multiple meanings and ways of understanding that might emerge. For the qualitative researcher, this idea applies to data collection, data analysis, and subsequent results of the study. I also focused on the idea that there is no knowledge or meaning outside of social processes. Even our most basic understanding of concepts like “self” or “truth” are the products of social relationships and historical or cultural concepts (Gergen, 2009).

Case study methodology is often appropriate when the researcher wants to explore the “how” of a particular experience (Yin, 2018). In this study, I wanted to explore how the participants had navigated and experienced their adult child’s disclosure of CPSA. Further, a case study allows the researcher to study complex social phenomena in depth, while retaining a “holistic and real-world perspective” (Yin, 2018, p. 5). A case study fits into a social constructionist and constructivist stance as it seeks understanding within a “particular social, cultural, and historical context” (Lee et al., 2010, p. 682) and it can “excel in …acknowledging multiple realities and having multiple meanings, with findings that are observer dependent” (Yin, 2018, p. 16). Structurally, in case study research, “there is not a set or limited number of variables to explore or control as in experimental studies” (Lee et al., 2010, p. 683) and this is a

preferred methodology when “the desire is to study some contemporary event or set of events” (Yin, 2018, p. 12).

More specifically, I used a Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology to assist in answering the research questions. This methodology held constructionist, constructivist and hermeneutical perspectives within a psychoanalytic frame (Tolleson, 1996). Of this intersection, Mills (2020) wrote:

> These epistemological positions are largely gathered from postmodern sensibilities that loosely fall under the umbrella of what may not be inappropriately called psychoanalytic hermeneutics: namely, methods of interpretation derived from subjective experience and participation in social relations that constitute meaning and knowledge. (p. 24)

Further, in writing about the field of psychoanalysis, Hoffman (2009) stated, “The ‘consequential uniqueness’ of each interaction and the indeterminacy associated with the free will of the participants make the individual case study especially suited for the advancement of ‘knowledge’- that is, the progressive enrichment of sensibility- in our field” (p. 1043).

This Psychoanalytic Case Study aimed for the collection of data via multiple interviews. Multiple interviews allowed for reflection by both participants and the researcher in between meetings as well as “the intent of collecting in-depth, thoughtful, reflective subjective experiences of each participant” (Chase, 2011, p. 433). A small sample size was used in order to generate depth of analysis rather than breadth (Tolleson, 1996) and each participant’s narrative was “analyzed and interpreted from a psychoanalytic perspective” (Chase, 2011, p. 431). Finally, Tolleson’s (1996) Psychoanalytic Case Study method, although informed by psychoanalytic theory, calls for a psychoanalytic pluralism with the presumption that “a rigid adherence to a

singular theoretical paradigm would be inherently reductionistic and would sorely obstruct [the researcher's] efforts to listen open-mindedly to the multiplicity of ways in which experiences and behaviors might contain meaning" (Tolleson, 1996, p. 29).

Thus, Tolleson's (1996) Psychoanalytic Case Study method was in alignment with my research goals. I wished to conduct an exploratory study of practicing Catholic mothers who had learned that their adult child experienced clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse during childhood. Using a hermeneutic, social constructionist and constructivist frame, I aimed to achieve a psychoanalytic understanding of the participants' subjective experience of disclosure and their navigation of it. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of multiple cases, both by within-case analysis and cross-case analysis.

Creation of the Research Sample

The research sample was composed of five mothers who each had one adult child who disclosed the experience of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse (CPSA) which occurred while they were under the age of 18. The small sample size was in keeping with the depth oriented approach of both case study research in general (Yin, 2018) and the Psychoanalytic Case Study in particular (Tolleson, 1996). Each mother represented an individual case.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for each mother included:

1. Must be age 21 or older.
2. Must be female and self-identify as a mother.
3. Must be self-identified as a practicing Roman Catholic at least until the moment of the disclosure. "Practicing Roman Catholic" was defined as an individual who received the sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation in the

Roman Catholic Church and facilitated their child's participation in the same. This individual attended Mass, and brought their minor child to Mass, regularly on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation.

4. Must be at least one year since the CPSA was disclosed to the participant.
5. Must be a fluent speaker of English.
6. Must agree to be interviewed 2-3 times for 60-90 minutes each, either via HIPAA compliant video platform or in-person and agreed to be audio recorded.
7. Potential participants were excluded if they had their own history of CPSA or previous consensual sexual contact with Catholic clergy.

I used purposive criterion sampling to recruit participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling that is indicated when the researcher aims to interview a limited number of participants who will "best help the researcher understand the problem" (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 198). When the sample matches the aims and objectives of the research, rigor and trustworthiness are increased (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is typically used in qualitative research. Criterion sampling is a type of purposive sampling in which participants are selected to fit predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria and when the researcher desires to study individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Bloomberg, 2023).

To recruit potential participants, I took the following steps. First, I created a recruitment flyer (Appendix A). Second, I created a solicitation email template (Appendix B). I posted the recruitment flyer on several list serves for psychotherapists that I had access to. I also emailed this flyer to colleagues who were able to post it on list serves for therapist groups that I am not a

part of. I sent the solicitation email to known psychotherapist colleagues who I thought might work with my target population.

Finally, I spent a considerable amount of time searching the internet for names and emails of psychotherapists, support group facilitators, researchers, attorneys, reporters, writers, and organizations who would potentially be able to put me in contact with individuals who might qualify as potential participants. I sent each an unsolicited email using a version of my email template that was tailored to their particular role. I also reached out to several via my professional LinkedIn account, if I could not otherwise find an email address. In each case, I inquired whether they could distribute my contact information to individuals who might be suitable for my study or to individuals who might be able to nominate potential participants.

All potential participants contacted me by email. I responded to each with a scripted reply (Appendix C) and invited them to schedule and participate in a short screening phone call with me. During the screening phone call, I used the screening interview script (Appendix D) that contained questions detailing the inclusion and exclusion criteria that determined the individual's suitability for my study. I further used my own intuition and inner reflection to decide if the mother was appropriate to be included in the sample. Of the first six mothers who contacted me, only one was excluded from the study, and this exclusion was due to the current age of her child.

During the screening phone call, I set up the date and time of the first interview. I then emailed the informed consent (Appendix E) and a HIPAA-compliant Zoom link to the participant. At the beginning of the first interview, I read the informed consent review script (Appendix F) to each participant and had her verbally verify that she understood the purpose of

the study and its potential risks and benefits. During this first meeting, I also collected demographic information (Appendix G) and began the first interview.

Information Needed

In a qualitative research study such as the one described here, the goal is to comprehensively understand the experience being studied. Bloomberg (2023) identified four types of information as being typically needed to achieve this objective. These areas of information are contextual, demographic, perceptual, and theoretical.

Contextual

Contextual information helps describe the relevant organizational or cultural setting of the study participants (Bloomberg, 2023). For this study, I needed to understand the historical, cultural, and social context of the Roman Catholic Church and how those factors have intersected with CPSA within this institution. By understanding the setting against which the participants' experiences took place, I gained a richer understanding of the data.

Demographic

Demographic information provides essential information about the individual study participants. This type of information was informative of the diversity or lack of diversity in the sample and allowed the researcher to make some basic interpretations about how differences in demographics were related to the participants' experiences of the phenomenon under study. For this study, I collected demographic information about each subject, including age, ethnicity, location, educational level, socioeconomic status, and marital status. I also asked each participant to inform me how old their child was at the time of the abuse, when the disclosure took place and

to whom the abuse was disclosed. I collected demographic information (Appendix G) from each participant after reviewing the informed consent form during the first meeting.

Perceptual

Perceptual information refers to research subjects' "perceptions related to the particular subject of…inquiry" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 271). This type of information included beliefs, values, opinions, or emotional responses to lived experiences. I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Appendix H) to gain insight into the participants' perceptions.

Theoretical

Finally, theoretical information provided a means for interpreting the data that I obtained. Theoretical information included the theories that guided the study and provided the foundation for interpreting the data. As described previously, psychoanalytic, social constructionism and constructivism, and hermeneutic lenses guided both the study design and data analysis.

Research Process

This exploratory study used a Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology (Tolleson, 1996). As eligible participants were identified and screened through the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the research study progressed as follows:

1. The informed consent form was reviewed with each participant and the participant was given the opportunity to ask questions.
2. Demographic information was collected.
3. The first 60- 90 minute semi-structured interview was administered.
4. The second 60- 90 minute semi-structured interview was administered.

5. A third 60- 90 minute semi-structured interview was administered in one instance (participant one) as the second interview was truncated due to scheduling constraints.
6. Each interview was transcribed.
7. Each transcription was reviewed by the researcher for accuracy.
8. The data were coded and analyzed with categories of meaning serving as thematic units. Analysis was conducted both within-case and cross-case.
9. Findings were formulated and written from the coded and analyzed data.
10. Findings were revised.
11. Findings were disseminated.

Data Collection

This Psychoanalytic Case Study sought to understand the participants' experience in a manner that prioritizes depth over scope. In this vein, I gathered data that emphasized "the deep and complex levels of psychological experience" (Tolleson, 1996, p.2) of the participants. To collect such data, I used semi-structured interviews and maintained a psychoanalytic or psychodynamic stance. My task was to gather information as I listened and encouraged each participant to speak (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As Fowler and Perry (2005) described it, "The psychodynamic research interview stimulates the initial consultation interview and shares the common features with early psychotherapy sessions in exploring life history and psychosocial functioning in order to assess defenses, conflicts, motives and relationship patterns" (p. 317). Further, in a 2005 study, Fowler and Perry identified specific interview tasks that facilitated in-depth exploration and the subject's ability to articulate psychological processes. These tasks are: frame setting, offering support, exploration of affect, interpretations, and

formulation and feedback about primary conflicts. In adapting Fowler and Perry's (2005) findings to my study, I hoped to elicit both "open-ended narrative and reflection" as well as "the unconscious subtext underlying the words that are uttered" (O'Loughlin et al., 2019, p. 17).

I used semi-structured interviews to capture the essence of each participant's experience. Semi-structured interview protocols created a balance between the need for specific open-ended questions about themes related to the research questions while allowing space for spontaneous topics to appear and be discussed (Bloomberg, 2023). This interview type also provided for some consistency in data collection across cases and allowed me to compare responses.

However, my goal during the interviews was to avoid interrogative interviewing. I maintained an attentive presence that allowed me to move beyond the manifest content of each participant's narrative in order to uncover the deeper, unspoken meanings that were embedded in their words, or latent content. I approached each meeting with a hermeneutic sensitivity that attended to pauses, metaphors, slips of the tongue, and affective content that might be indicative of pre-conscious or unconscious dimensions of experience. Using this type of listening stance and suspending my own preconceptions as much as possible further allowed the participants' unique subjectivities to emerge and ideally created an intersubjective field in which their unformulated experiences were able to take shape and find expression.

As displayed in Appendix H, the semi-structured probes inquired about several themes. I was interested in the participants' experiences before, during, and after the disclosure of CPSA. I wanted them to narrate their experiences of those time frames in terms of their relationship to the Catholic Church and to their child. I was also interested in their perceptions of themselves and how the way they defined themselves had or had not changed. Finally, I was curious about how

they have managed their feelings about the disclosure and any resulting significant changes in their lived experiences. Following the lead of Creswell and Creswell (2023), I used a list of interview probes after each semi-structured content question in order to elicit more information, clarification, or explanation (Appendix H).

In its final form, the data consisted of transcripts of each interview. I double-checked the transcription for accuracy. The data also consisted of a field journal, in which I noted the observations that I made during each contact with each participant. I made both external observations of each participant as well as reflective observations of my own thoughts, feelings and reactions during the series of interviews and as I read each transcript.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for a Psychoanalytic Case Study (Tolleson, 1996) used a hermeneutic approach that emphasized the interpretation of both manifest content and latent meanings within each participant's narrative. I used a layered interpretative process that moved between the participants' explicit statements and the implicit meanings that I encountered. As such, the analysis had me deeply immersing myself in the transcripts that were created verbatim from the interviews. Using a psychoanalytic listening stance, I attended to not only what was actually said, but also to, for example, emotional undercurrents, patterns of speech, silences, and contradictions. Through this hermeneutic circle of understanding (Crotty, 1998), moving between parts and whole, "from the idiosyncratic to the more general, and from the concrete to the abstract" (Tolleson, 1996, p. 92), I developed interpretative themes that captured the essence of each participant's lived experience. These interpretations were guided by the validity criteria of comprehensiveness, experience-nearness, coherence, and aesthetic quality (Atwood & Stolorow,

2014), in order to ensure that the analysis was as close to the participants' subjective experience as possible.

Two key concepts in Psychoanalytic Case Study analysis are categories of meaning and interpretative themes. At the heart of the Psychoanalytic Case Study method is the analysis of the data for categories of meaning (J. Tolleson, personal communication, March 14, 2025). Categories of meaning were "based on the words and behaviors of subjects, which [appear] to offer compelling insights" (Tolleson, 1996, p. 93). They were derived from both manifest and latent content. Categories of meaning were more specific to an individual participant than broader themes and served to allow the broader themes to be elucidated. Interpretative themes were broader themes of meaning that emerged as I engaged with the data and represented an interpretative understanding of reoccurring elements in the participants' experiences. Interpretative themes included broader patterns that were identified across subjects.

More specifically, the first phase of the data analysis was the analysis of each case individually. This within-case analysis began with a thorough re-reading of each transcript which allowed me to immerse myself in the data and "gain a sense of their possibilities" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 337). I used *in vivo* coding methods, in which labels were useful for both frequently used or similar words or expressions. Conversely, rarely used words or expressions that stand out as outliers were coded. I used several cycles of coding to aid in the discovery of identifying thematic patterns that related to the research question, which was to describe and understand the individual subjective experience of practicing Roman Catholic mothers in the United States whose adult children have disclosed that they experienced clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse during their childhood. Specifically, after the re-reading of an individual transcript, I used a first coding

cycle to identify data to use in the initial description of each case. In a second coding cycle, I marked words and passages relevant to manifest content. I coded for latent content in a third coding cycle. However, this process was iterative as each cycle built upon previous cycles and I moved back and forth within the data as I wrote the case summaries and elucidated the categories of meaning in a non-linear process. I searched for categories of meaning that related to the research questions. This analysis integrated the participant's manifest statements with other data sources that inferred latent meaning, such as nonverbal behavior, the participant's interactions with me, and my own countertransference reactions. I also identified a psychoanalytic concept that most clearly anchored each category of meaning.

Finally, a case narrative was written for each participant. This narrative included the participant's demographic information, a description of the participant's relationship to the Catholic Church, the participant's narrative of their child, their experience of the disclosure, the aftermath of the disclosure, the reason the participant was willing to participate in this study, how their pseudonyms were selected and my experience of the participant. The narrative also detailed the categories of meaning that emerged from the data. The entire narrative for each participant was written with a rich description that was supported with direct quotations from the participant's transcript.

Next, I examined themes, categories of meaning, and the anchoring psychoanalytic concept across all of the participants. I identified similarities and differences across cases. Finally, I integrated these findings into broader understandings of the experiences of these mothers. By using this dual analysis, I aimed to remain grounded in the participants' subjective experiences and to gain a degree of understanding of the phenomenon that was under study.

Ethical Considerations

In any research that involves human participants, the foremost ethical concern is to protect these individuals from undue harm (Bloomberg, 2023). It is important to recognize that "participants can be vulnerable and that researchers carry a responsibility to promote their welfare and guard against harm" (Haverkamp, 2005, p.147). In this study, participants were asked to share their perspectives about a presumably sensitive topic, that is, the disclosure of the sexual abuse of their child or children by clergy from their own religion. For those who experienced the disclosure as a traumatic experience, discussing this experience had the potential to cause the participant to re-live it and thereby be re-traumatized (Eisold, 2019). I was aware of the possibility that study participants could be verbalizing their experience for the first time, or that they had not previously processed the disclosure and their feelings about it (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Minimally, discussing this sensitive topic could have caused emotional discomfort, anxiety, or feelings of vulnerability. In order to reasonably mitigate these potential effects, I offered participants a list of mental health resources (Appendix I), I provided opportunities for breaks during the interviews, and I informed participants that they could decline to answer any question for any reason and that they could drop out of the study at any time without consequence. Likewise, I attempted to pace the interview so that the participants were more likely to feel emotionally contained at the conclusion of the interview. A further ethical component to avoiding harm to the participants was that I capture their experiences accurately. I reflected their statements back to them during the interviews in an attempt to confirm accuracy.

Next, participant information must be protected. There are several considerations in this regard. First, participants have the right to anonymity. As DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006)

stated, “During interviewing, the interviewee may share information that could jeopardize his or her position in a system. This information must remain anonymous and protected from those whose interests conflict with those of the interviewee” (p. 319). In this particular study, participants might either want to maintain a relationship with their parish or they might be involved in litigation against the Church. In either case, their identities and narratives must be protected. This protection was possible via the use of pseudonyms and the redaction of specific terms. Some identifying experiences and details were omitted from the written narrative. Physical materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked professional office and electronic materials were safeguarded by HIPAA compliant virtual platforms and passcodes that were only known to the primary researcher.

Third, an ethical study must ensure the “adequate communication of the intent of the investigation” (DiCicco & Crabtree, 2006, p. 319). This stance took the form of written and verbal consent at the beginning of the interviews. I created additional opportunities for verbal consent before or during each subsequent interview. Further, it was important not to exploit participants for the researcher’s personal gain. Although I did not monetarily reimburse nor give gifts of appreciation to the participants, I acknowledged their contributions to the success of the project and to the social work knowledge base. Finally, I received appropriate IRB approval from my institute before recruiting any participants.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The nature of qualitative research, such as its small and often non-representative samples, its subjectivity and assumptions, its respondent bias, and its inability to be generalized, lends it to scrutiny of its trustworthiness (J. Ridings, personal communication, 2024). Trustworthiness

refers to the integrity of the research process, which in turn, affects its findings and conclusions. It is important that the study's findings reflected the participants' perspectives and the context of the study and that the reader be assured that the study is "believable, accurate and plausible" (J. Ridings, personal communication, 2024) and "of significance and value" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 117). In the context of qualitative research, trustworthiness is assessed via credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is concerned with the idea that the researcher's interpretations of the data should accurately represent the experiences that the participants have conveyed during the data collection. In the context of a qualitative case study, "credibility aims to demonstrate that the inquiry was carried out in such a way as to establish relations among the different components of the case, to achieve rich and meaningful descriptions of the case, and to assure internal coherence of findings in the data analysis" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 684). In order to maintain credibility in the present study, I used self-reflection to identify my biases and assumptions and kept a reflective journal to identify these throughout the research process. Prolonged involvement, thick description, triangulation, and member checking are also means to increase credibility (Bloomberg, 2023).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the data's stability and ability to be repeated over time and under various conditions. For a qualitative study to be dependable, the research process must be "clearly documented, logical, and traceable" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 303). Dependability may be achieved through triangulation, audit trails (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, as cited in Bloomberg,

2023), and peer reviews by colleagues or panel members. For this study, I used an audit trail, in that I thoroughly documented all the steps used in both data collection and analysis. My dissertation chair and committee members provided peer reviews.

Transferability

The extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other groups or contexts describes the concept of transferability, which parallels the concepts of generalizability and external validity (Lee et al., 2010). In qualitative research, the reader, rather than the researcher, bears the responsibility for determining whether the findings are transferrable. The researcher can increase transferability by describing the purposeful sampling strategy in detail, by using thick description to enhance the complexity of the research (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Bloomberg, 2023) and by providing detailed information about "the context, background, data, and findings…so that readers can make comparisons with other similar contexts based on as much information as possible" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 305). In this vein, I included as much rich detail as possible when writing the descriptions of the study procedures, analysis, and results.

Confirmability

Finally, confirmability is the degree to which the findings are shaped by the participants' narratives and not by the researcher's assumptions, biases, or motivations. Confirmability is increased via reflexivity, triangulation and audit trails (Bloomberg, 2023). To maximize confirmability, I used an audit trail as mentioned above, with included all notes and memos that I created during the research process.

Limitations and Delimitations

Qualitative case studies are often criticized for their small sample sizes and "consequent limitations of inference and generalizability of findings" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 683). Generalizability refers to the ability of research findings to be applied to other populations or contexts. However, the Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology does not have empirical aims (J. Tolleson, personal communication, March 14, 2025), and as such, generalizability is not one of its goals.

Validity is determined through the "distinctively hermeneutic criteria" (Atwood & Stolorow, 2014, p. 6) of experience-nearness, comprehensiveness, coherence and aesthetic quality. Experience-nearness refers to how well the researcher's interpretations captured the lived experience of the participants. Comprehensiveness indicated that the interpretations accounted for the data without selectively focusing on the evidence that fit a preconceived theory. Interpretations of the data should also formed a coherent whole in that they made sense of the data in a meaningful way. Finally, valid interpretations should be aesthetic in that they were compelling and resonated with the readers of the research findings.

Case studies, such as this study, were subject to researcher bias, due to the subjective observations and biases of the researcher. In kind, the data collected was the result of the unique dyadic interaction of the researcher and each participant. In this respect, validity could be strengthened via multiple interviews, researcher reflexivity, consultation with other researchers, multiple data sources and a second reviewer to ensure that the primary researcher's interpretations are not solely reflective of the researcher's idiosyncratic point of view.

As the researcher, I made intentional decisions to limit the scope of this study so that its intent was reasonably attainable. These delimitations can be outlined as follows. First, I began with a general interest in the phenomenon of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Because a review of the literature revealed that both the effects on direct victims and institutional factors that support the cover-up of CPSA have been well studied, I decided to focus on the effect CPSA had on other members of the victims' families. I specifically chose to scrutinize the effect on mothers of the victims as this would create a more homogenous sample and because prior studies have shown that mothers are affected differently than fathers or other family members (Manion et al., 1996). Likewise, limiting participants to practicing or formerly practicing Catholics allowed me to more directly understand CPSA as a unique betrayal (Guido, 2008).

Role and Background of the Researcher

I designed this study, facilitated the recruitment of participants, interviewed the participants, and performed the data analysis. My background, as both a psychoanalytically-trained clinical social worker and as a former volunteer who performed mental health evaluations for individuals seeking asylum in the United States, was relevant. As a psychotherapist, I am skilled and comfortable at engaging individuals in discussions of sensitive topics. In my role as mental health evaluator, I became adept at adopting a neutral stance while helping individuals share their experiences of trauma. Further, during these interviews, I was not able to not engage with each participant from a therapeutic perspective, however, I was able to perceive when they moved beyond their window of tolerance and shifted the conversation or offered a break before

resuming our discussion of the more difficult material. I believe these skills aided me during the data collection phase of the study.

Additionally, I was raised in a practicing Catholic household and attended Catholic school for ten years during my own childhood. This background allowed me to understand the social context of the participants. My fluency in the rituals and specific vocabulary of Roman Catholicism helped me to build rapport with the participants and engage more deeply with their stories. As I noted previously, my own relationship and history with Catholicism intersected and interacted with my understanding of each participant. However, as mentioned above, I used the tools available to me to minimize the impact of my biases on this research study.

Chapter IV

Findings

Introduction

During the data collection stage of this Psychoanalytic Case Study, each participant was interviewed two or three times for a total of approximately four hours of semi-structured conversation. Each transcript was analyzed one case at a time, using multiple coding cycles. Four to six categories of meaning were identified for each individual case, before broader themes were constructed during the cross-case analysis. This chapter details the within-case analysis for each participant and Chapter Five will discuss the cross-case analysis.

Each case was written in a similar manner. A narrative introduces each participant, including general information, her history with Catholicism, her child, the disclosure experience, and its aftermath. In keeping with the psychoanalytic principle that all material is potentially meaningful, I then added sections that describe the participant's thoughts about participating in this study, how pseudonyms were chosen for her and her child, and my own experience of the participant. In each case, I thought about my experience of and my countertransference reactions in terms of what came up within me about that participant individually, rather than in relation to my feelings or thoughts about any of the other participants.

A section that details the categories of meaning I arrived at for each participant follows her narrative. I have titled each category of meaning with the participant's own words. I then described each in terms of its aim and action and grounded my understanding of it with psychoanalytic theory. Finally, I further detailed each category of meaning using rich, descriptive quotes directly from the participant's transcript. As I used myself as the instrument of

interpretation, these categories of meaning are subjective and unique to my own subjectivity and process.

Throughout the process of conducting this study, I tried to remain as true as possible to the experiences of these five mothers. However, due to the very sensitive nature of the subject of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, I have highly de-identified their descriptions, narratives, and identities. I omitted some aspects of their experiences both before and after their sons' disclosures. These specific accounts contained content that would be nearly impossible to de-identify while staying true to the actual occurrences.

Case One: Susan

General Information

Susan is in her 60s and has lived her life in various locations in a state in the western United States. She lives in a suburban area and identifies as Hispanic. Susan holds a Master's degree and presently maintains a career. She and her husband have been married for decades. They have adult children and grandchildren. One of her children, James, passed away as a young adult. He was sexually abused by a priest who was close to the family.

Susan was raised a practicing Catholic and, in turn, raised her children in the Church. She left the Church after James disclosed his abuse. Since James's death, Susan has embraced advocacy for both those abused by Catholic clergy and those who have struggled with addiction.

Being Catholic

Susan described a wonderful childhood in a large, well-off, extended family with lots of friends around, "We had a humongous family, very, very, very, very, very Catholic." Going back to Susan's grandparents, the family was well known in their community and donated copious

amounts of money to the Catholic Church. In fact, “Catholic Churches have photos of groundbreakings where all of the aunts and uncles have shovels” and “it was just really a strong Catholic family that went to Mass.”

While she was growing up, being Catholic was a part of all aspects of her life. Susan remembered:

> I always had the darling outfit with little, you know, socks and I always had a matching hat and gloves and had my prayer book. I still saved all of it. My First Communion dress, my daughter’s First Communion dress, everything, all of it and we’d go every Sunday and my brothers were altar boys and it was special.

Susan and her husband raised their own children in the same way. “We baptized them and then we’d have everyone over to celebrate the baptism, special little gifts, Christian gifts, Catholic gifts and so they were all baptized. They all had their sacraments.” Susan shared a vivid memory of James from the day of his first confession:

> He came out of the confessional and we were all there, all in the rows waiting for him and he looked at us. He went to the very back pew. I can still picture this, and he knelt down and he prayed. He loved his faith and he prayed and he prayed. He was there for probably five minutes and then he came to us and we went home and had dinner and celebrated.

Susan’s parents were warm and gregarious hosts:

> Someone would knock on the door and my dad would start the barbecue and my mom would start the homemade ice cream. It was just welcoming. My parents truly welcomed you. They could care less where you came from and what I loved about growing up, I

> didn't know if I had a penny or a gazillion dollars. I loved that we were just kids. We were just kids.

These gatherings often included parish priests. "Always priests came for dinner. It was always lively and the priests loved them and so there was always just this wonderful life of just always something happening, always, and centering around the Church and the priests."

James

James was a beautiful, warm-hearted boy who grew up with his parents, siblings, and a large extended family. He was sexually abused during his early childhood, by a priest who was close to the family. He grew up with inklings of this abuse, but his memories became clearer during his early adolescence. During late adolescence, he became aware of the full scope of the abuse. After this revelation, James "really started acting out. He was reliving it constantly. It was just over and over again. Over and over. So couldn't get it out of his head. Every night he tried to go to sleep and he couldn't." James spent the remainder of his life struggling with substance abuse and in and out of treatment centers. Susan described this time by saying, "And so it went from bad to worse. Like, literally, the stories are horrible. They're gut-wrenching, the stories. I mean, the rehabs, everything was unbelievable, actually. It was unbelievable." James ultimately passed away as a result of his abuse and subsequent addiction.

The Disclosure

When James was a late adolescent, he told the family that he knew "something" had happened to him. Susan said, "I believed him in a second. I believed him in a second, like split second, right then, I believed him."

Within a year or so, James entered therapy. After one particular session, he told Susan, "Mom, it all came out today" and described in detail what had actually happened to him as a young child. Susan described that moment by saying, "I thought this feels like the worst nightmare ever, I mean this has to be a nightmare."

After the Disclosure

After the disclosure, Susan spent many years struggling with James's addiction. Since his death, she has embraced being his voice, telling his story, and advocating for other individuals and families who have experienced clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. She is also active in communities that support those who have struggled with substance abuse and is an advocate for reform in this area.

Telling Her Story

Although I did not ask Susan specifically why she was willing to be a participant in my study, it became clear to me that she saw this opportunity as an extension of being James's voice and getting his story into the discourse. I imagine Susan hopes that what happened to him and their family is not minimized or forgotten.

Pseudonyms

Susan chose the names "Susan" and "James" for herself and her son. She gave no explanation other than that she liked these two names. I explored the meaning of the name "Susan," and found that it is derived from a Hebrew name for a flower and that this name is associated with purity, beauty, and grace (Campbell, n.d.-c). Susan chose a name with a meaning that is similar to many of the words she used throughout our conversations, such as special, beautiful, and pure. The words "purity" and "grace" also parallel her transformational arc. Susan

was raised in a world that felt pure to her. James's disclosure disrupted that purity, yet, since his death, she has carried the traumatic experience of learning of his abuse and his death with a remarkable grace. It also strikes me that Susan chose the name James for her son. The name James, derived from the Latin *Iacomus* and the Hebrew *Ya'aqov*, may be interpreted to mean "may God protect" (Campbell, n.d.-a). I imagine this to be Susan's wish for James while he was living, and perhaps, now that he has passed away.

My Experience of Susan

I experienced Susan as open, engaging, and with the willingness and able to immerse me deeply in her story. I felt that I barely needed to prompt her and that her story naturally flowed out of her mouth with rich, descriptive language. Throughout our interviews, I noticed that it was easier to access James's story than Susan's own inner life. She seemed more at home in his experience than in her own and more practiced at being his voice than at speaking in her own. I found myself wanting to know more about what was happening inside Susan, beneath her generosity and grace. It felt difficult to access her own inner life and I felt that she was more compelled to share James's story than, specifically, her own. I noticed that during our first interview, in particular, I felt exhausted and that feeling spilled over into the hours after we spoke. Susan emailed me some photos, including one of a picture that James drew as a young child. She plans to have T-shirts made with this drawing on them. I found myself having the fantasy that she would send me one of the shirts and that I would wear it while defending this dissertation. I also had the desire to use James's actual nickname in my writing.

Categories of Meaning

Six categories of meaning emerged from Susan's interviews. These six categories reflect Susan's immersion in Catholic culture and faith, her existence in the liminal, the changes in her identity as James's mother, and three ways in which she has been transformed by the experience of her son's abuse and disclosure: her transformation in understanding, her transformation in agency, and a transformation in the way that she expresses emotion. These categories move through time from her immersion in Catholicism before the disclosure, through the liminal and a renegotiated identity as a mother to the three aspects of her personal transformation. To keep each category grounded in her experience, I used a single quote from Susan to title each category of meaning.

"It was just really a life. It was something else."

This category of meaning describes the way in which Susan was totally immersed in Catholic life. This immersion was within her own family as well as within the Catholic Church as an institution. These layers of immersion preserved her beautiful world and kept it livable by protecting her from knowing what existed within it.

Winnicott (1960) described the *holding environment* as a nurturing and safe milieu that is attuned to an infant's needs and provides the safety and care that an infant needs to develop a secure sense of self. This holding environment further protects the child from impingements that are severe enough to disrupt their development. For Susan and her family, Catholicism functioned as a generational holding environment. This environment was warm, all-encompassing, and unquestioned. It allowed the family, both individually and collectively, to go-on-being (Winnicott, 1963).

Within this holding environment, Susan inhabited what Bion (1962) would describe as a state of minus K (- K). - K is a state in which there is an evasion of knowledge by the destruction of the capacity to know. - K is a defense against painful emotional experiences. This structure systematically keeps certain kinds of knowing outside the boundaries of what can be perceived or thought. The fish-in-the-water metaphor, describes this type of system. The fish does not notice the water because water is simply the condition of existence. In parallel and on a systemic level, this holding environment protected both predatory clergy and the institutional Church from the repercussions of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Susan described growing up Catholic in her family of origin:

> And so there was always just this wonderful life of just something happening always and centering around the church and the priests…So that was, yeah, that was, growing up was special. It was just, every day was just that way. It was just the way we were brought up. Everything was just our normal.

Another of Susan's statements, "It was just really a life" captures this perfectly. It was not a life she chose or examined. It was the only life she had ever known. However, despite the manifest content, "It was just really a life," her next phrase, "It was something else" points to something else, something that cannot be said directly.

Susan described her family's generational relationship with Catholicism as a type of total and protective immersion. She repeatedly pointed to the theme of how impossible it was to see what was going on from this vantage point. She was totally immersed in the framework of a large, devoutly Catholic family that held her in a world that felt so safe and warm that it was like

the concept of threat had no place to form. This immersion is, again, akin to the fish-in-the-water formulation. One cannot scrutinize what one is entirely inside of.

Immersion as protection was not chosen. It was structural, as Susan described, "And there were always priests. I'm not kidding you. Always priests for dinner." She also mentioned inherited and generational aspects along with the fact that this was all unquestioned:

> So it happened because my mom and dad were groomed and also because that's what you did. You took care of them. They were God-like and so they were always over and never in a million years would they [her parents] have dreamed anything.

Susan's repeated use of the phrase "heir apparent" conveys this inherited generational quality, "It was so heir apparent, right?" In retrospect, she said, "So how in the world does somebody not do anything about this when it's heir apparent that he's molesting children?"

An aspect of the structure of the immersion was a sense of being special or of belonging to something sacred. Susan used the word "special" repeatedly to describe being Catholic and without apparent awareness of its double meaning. She said of her childhood, "And we'd go to Mass every Sunday and my brothers were altar boys and it was special," and of her own family, "And so we raised our kids Catholic, and, you know, it was special. The sacraments were special. They were very special." When her children were baptized, "We had their special outfits and then we'd have everyone over to celebrate the baptism, special little gifts, Christian gifts, Catholic gifts…growing up was special." The Church cultivates a sense of specialness among its followers. Child sex abusers often use the same language with the children they abuse. Predatory Catholic clergy can potentially use this to their advantage as the child's feeling of specialness is already present. As Susan's own repeated and spontaneous use of the word conveys, the feeling

of specialness was completely genuine and embedded in growing up Catholic. The clergy-predator doesn't need to create this feeling as a Catholic child will naturally feel special to have individual attention from a priest.

The structure of immersion in Catholic life also includes its own defense system. Susan described it, "I mean, we had this life and so when this priest, there were starting to be these inklings. My parents were angry. How dare people." Susan said further:

> My dad would get so angry when it would be all over the local newspaper. He'd be yelling, screaming, that blah blah blah newspaper, they don't know what they're talking about and then I said, 'Dad, what is this though?' He said, 'He gave those kids bad grades on tests and so they told, they made up the story that he molested them' and I believed it. I believed all of it.

Her father's anger is not mere denial, it seems to be a vicissitude of the Church's operational defensive system.

Susan's childhood in her loving Catholic family protected her from knowing what they were living inside of. The single scene in which she described her parents welcoming priests into their home for dinner with a barbecue and homemade ice cream captured their lived immersion inside of Catholicism in every sense. Being immersed within this Catholic family system protected Susan from even the thought of harm, that is, awareness was unnecessary. Not only did this protective immersion protect Susan, and generationally, her family, but it was also a structure that protected the Church from scrutiny.

I noticed that Susan used immersion in her family life as protection during our interviews. When some difficult material came close, she re-immersed herself in positive images

of her family and faith. For example, there was a moment when she was not able to complete the thought of a priest being in her brother's bedroom:

> He would take my brothers in. My mom would ask him to take my brothers, enter their bedroom, close the door, and talk about sex. Well it, isn't it unreal that you're, it's unreal but you also didn't, I was so naive, I was such a cub, I was such an ignorant little girl, I thought the world was beautiful. My mom made me gorgeous little dresses from her, you know, sewing machine and her simplicity patterns.

Towards the end of our final interview, Susan distinguished the not-knowing of structural immersion as protection, from conscious or avoidant not-knowing, when she said:

> You know, how I mentioned to you, how growing up was great. I mean, it was amazing. I loved my childhood. I loved high school years. I mean, I've had a really good life, but I didn't dig my head in the sand. I just didn't know.

Susan's statement, "I just didn't know," is not the language of motivated not-knowing. It is the language of someone whose going-on-being was so thoroughly held within a particular structure that the structure itself was invisible. The disclosure of James's abuse proved to be a traumatic impingement, or a rupture, that was so total that her holding environment could no longer hold her. The environment that had seemed to be a safe, secure and familial holding environment revealed itself to be something completely different, that is, an institutional holding environment that existed to protect both individual clergy-perpetrators and the institution in which they inhabited. The immersion that protected Susan from knowing and kept her feeling safe was also the structure that protected the Church from scrutiny.

The disclosure and the rupture of her holding environment threatened the continuity of Susan's core self and unleashed an exhausting anxiety about her ability to go-on-being. I experienced the weight of this anxiety in the exhaustion I felt during our first interview and in the hours after it. I understand this feeling as the result of being completely immersed in Susan's story, just as Susan had been completely immersed in a Catholic environment. In parallel with Susan's experience, I was allowed to feel the utter exhaustion, that is the result of experiencing a shattered holding environment, without even needing to ask her to verbalize it.

"I don't know what I'm going to get. My son or this crazy person."

This category of meaning is an expression of the various ways in which Susan holds the irreconcilable. The concept of the liminal was first introduced by van Gennep (1909/1960) to describe a threshold phase of a rite of passage. This is an in-between state that one exists in after leaving a former position, but before arriving in a new position. Turner (1969) later elaborated on the idea of the liminal. He characterized it as a state of being betwixt and between that is marked by ambiguity and the disruption of what was known. By metaphorically living in the liminal, Susan manages the tension between what was, or what she thought was, and what she now knows. She is sitting in-between these states so that she does not have to fully inhabit either position.

Susan's liminal state can be understood psychoanalytically as the experience of the depressive position breaking through a previously intact defensive structure. This system of defenses had Susan existing in a split world of all-good and all-bad. Klein (1940) describes the *depressive position* as a stance in which one can recognize that a loved object may also be a damaged object, and the world contains goodness and love but also loss, destruction, and

ambivalence. For Susan, the disclosure did not simply add painful knowledge to an intact world. It revealed that the loved objects she had organized her life around, including the Church, her mother, and James, contained damage she had not been able to see or feel from inside the immersion. She was left holding the full complexity of the depressive position, which includes simultaneous love and grief, the before and the after, and her beautiful boy and his later addiction-related behavior. She is not yet able to fully integrate these poles into a coherent whole. The fact that Susan is operating within the depressive position in the aftermath of such trauma is significant and attests to her strength. The use of manic defenses (Klein, 1940) that are apparent in her choice to not remain in bed with her blinds closed, her fierce forward momentum, and mission to be James's voice are defenses that exist in the depressive position and are used to manage reality, rather than avoid it. The liminal is not a failure to move forward, but a place in which Susan is managing complexity and doing the work of experiencing what she previously could not bear to hold.

Susan is living in the liminal, a threshold state that is the result of James's disclosure of his clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. When he revealed what had happened to him, Susan's world was fractured into before and after. She is moving from the past to an as-yet-unknown point in the future. For now, however, she lives in the space between, and she is holding the tension of these two positions. During the analysis of our interviews, it became clear that the liminal position is organizing Susan's experience. It appears in how she speaks about James, her mother, and the Church, as well as in the words she finds when her direct feelings cannot yet be named. She is between two versions of reality that may feel unresolvable.

Two Images of James.

Susan is living between two contrasting and irreconcilable sets of memories of James. The first is of James before the disclosure:

> He was a beautiful little boy…and he loved everybody in the world. He would give you anything you wanted. Anything. He was fun. He was silly. He was just everybody's friend. He's beautiful, handsome, and he could have been a model.

This James is vivid and present in Susan's memory, not past tense in any emotional sense. She speaks of him mostly in the past tense, but throws in one sentence using the present tense. She keeps herself in a space where James is both alive and deceased.

The second James is the one who the abuse and resulting addiction created, "It was horrible. I mean we probably spent years in a living hell." Susan describes him at her home, "so absolutely out of it...walking around, bumping into everything" while her husband barbecued outside. The ordinary domestic scene and the horror existed simultaneously in the same space. The phone message he left her captures the duality most acutely:

> He had this gorgeous voice and this gorgeous laugh...and I'm in my car, and I won't even do the voice, and I'm getting ready to drive off a [metaphoric] cliff, and he just gets worse. He's screaming like a devil.

Susan moves from the beautiful voice and laugh to the screaming voice in the same breath, naming what she heard as a devil voice, even as she preserves the beauty of who James was. She cannot describe one without the other.

Susan holds these two images together in a way that is neither denial nor resolution. "I just think of that beautiful little boy...with the big smile and the big blue eyes…That's who, well, that's how I feel, who we buried, because he wouldn't be like this if he hadn't been molested."

She described a time after his death, when people came and spoke of him, “That’s the real James. Yeah, that’s the real James until the devil got ahold of him.”

The question Susan cannot answer, and perhaps cannot even bear to think of fully is, which James was real? Her answer needs to be both. The beautiful boy was real, and what was done to him was real. She is left holding both without a framework that can contain them together, as she states, “I don’t know what I’m going to get. My son or this crazy person.”

Two Versions of Mother.

Susan also presented two versions of her mother that she cannot fully reconcile. The first is of a loving, warm mother who sewed Susan’s dresses. She said, “My mom made me gorgeous little dresses from her, you know, sewing machine and her simplicity patterns,” and dressed her for Mass, “My mom sewed all my dresses, so I always had the darling outfit with little, you know, socks and I always had a matching hat and gloves and I had my prayer book.”

Her mother could also be an old school Catholic disciplinarian after Susan got into some innocent childhood mischief, “That night, we were on our knees doing so many Hail Marys… like you’re going to say ten Hail Marys, a hundred Hail Marys…On your knees, bare knees, right?” This mother also sent a priest into her brothers’ bedroom, “My mom would ask him to take my brothers, enter their bedroom, close the door, and talk about sex. Well, isn’t it unreal?”

Susan can only hold this second version of her mother for so long. As previously mentioned, when the unbearable comes close, immersion as protection draws her back, “Because that’s how they all lived and that’s how my mom lived.” The mother who sent the priest into the bedroom and the mother who made the dresses are the same mother. Susan is living in the space

between the mother she adored as a child and the mother who was possibly complicit in clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

In Between Two Selves at Christmas Mass.

After James's death, Susan agreed to attend Christmas Mass with one of her other children and her grandchildren. The contrast between this experience in a church and what attending Mass had been like for her before James's disclosure is striking. Now, she is at Mass for no other reason than to be a present and supportive grandmother. She is also carrying knowledge that has made this once-beloved experience unbearable, "I was struggling being there. I mean, like, really having anxiety and I never felt that way. I mean I wanted to [walk out]…It was just, it was just, it was awful."

Susan is in the liminal here in the most literal sense. She is physically at Mass inside a church, but psychologically no longer inside the Church. She is between her former practicing Catholic self and her present self, who is no longer a practicing Catholic, and she is performing a kind of continuity for her adult child and grandchildren that no longer feels meaningful, but actually feels dreadful. Her words to her child after Mass revealed how consciously she is holding this threshold position:

> 'We raised you this way.' I said, 'Please don't ever apologize for that. Don't. You're not responsible for what happened to your brother in any way, shape, or form…I'm proud of you. I'm proud of what you've done, how you've raised your kids. Don't ever apologize to me again, okay?'

Odd and Bizarre.

During our interviews, I heard Susan's position in the liminal in the specific words she reached for when she could not name direct feeling. She returned repeatedly to the words "odd" and "bizarre," which seem to be words that sit between the world she inhabited and the world she exists in now.

Of the priest's grooming of her family she said, "It was so odd how he could groom them to include him as if he were family." She did not say it was evil, or criminal, or unforgivable. She said "odd," as if she is simultaneously holding her former self who found nothing strange about a priest constantly at the family home, and her present self who finds it completely strange.

At her grandchild's First Communion, when she saw a priest with the young children, she said, "It brought back these awful memories of pedophile priests. I'm not accusing this one of anything, of course not, but it's just odd. It's just really odd and given what we've been through and now what I know…" Her sentence trailed off as if what she knows cannot quite be said directly. "Odd" holds the place of the unsayable.

She used "bizarre" similarly as she spoke about the Christmas Mass, "The priest was, the sermon must have gone on for a half an hour at least, all about him and it was bizarre." "Bizarre," like "odd," is a word that names strangeness without fully committing to judgment. It is the language of someone standing at the threshold, looking back at a world that no longer makes sense and not yet having words for the world she is moving toward.

It seems that Susan needs the liminal state as she processes all that has happened and the terrible truths that have been revealed. Just as immersion was protective in the past, inhabiting the liminal state is protective in the present. Susan holds irreconcilable, simultaneous versions of

reality with the aim of managing the unbearable tension between what was and what is without having to fully inhabit either.

Further, James's disclosure has revealed that Susan's beloved internal objects, such as James, the Church, and her mother, are damaged in a way that it was not possible for her to see from inside the immersion. She is holding the complexity of the depressive position: the before and the after, love and grief, her fun, silly, beautiful boy and the young man whose substance use made him unrecognizable and screaming in, what Susan described as a "devil voice." Within the liminal, Susan is not yet able to integrate these into a coherent whole. Susan's repeated use of the words "odd" and "bizarre" to describe what she now sees and feels is evidence of the anxiety that the liminal position is generating. These words sit between two ways of knowing, and name the strangeness without fully feeling it, and perhaps hold anxiety at bay.

"You better buck up, buttercup, because you've got to keep your son's memory alive."

This category of meaning describes how Susan has renegotiated her role as James's mother. Susan was a devout and loving mother to her adorable little son in a way that she had perhaps imagined since her own childhood. After his death, she had to reinvent herself as his mother and recreate this role in a livable and meaningful way.

The processes of internalization and identification are at the core of Susan's reorganized identity as James's mother. James as her beautiful little boy was internalized as a good object that sustains her and is at the foundation of her daily life and mission. That is, James lives metaphorically inside of her and shapes her experience, from within, of herself and her world. Connected to this internalization is Susan's identification with James. She did not only advocate

for him and remember him, but she also described feeling what he felt, and of carrying his load and his despair. Susan is now mothering James by taking him and his experiences within her. She refuses to let the mother-child relationship end with his death and transforms the loss into a type of continued presence.

Again, James's disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse and his later death have forced Susan to renegotiate her identity as James' mother. When James was young, she was a devoted Catholic mother who was fully engaged in raising her children, "They were all baptized. They all had their sacraments…I was on the Mother's Guild. Everything was wonderful. It was just fun." She also said, "I mean, we were so happy, you know, and I loved it. I loved being a mom and, of course, we have great kids. Teenage years are teenage years but we just have great kids."

She had no framework for even suspecting that he had been abused, which was intuitively known by an in-law, "And [one of my in-laws] was like, 'Oh, we always knew where our kids were. We couldn't stand that guy'. So why didn't you tell me? You know? And they said, 'because you wouldn't have believed us.'" This is still, to an extent, the mother she was when James's struggles with addiction began:

> So, you know, when we first took him to the, well, the one rehab I mentioned to you…We were so naive. We really believed that he's going to go to this, and then he's just going to be fine. Everything's going to be great again. You know, this and this and that and obviously it was not the case because it went on and on and on and on.

As his addiction progressed, Susan was in the crucible, and her identity as a naive Catholic mother began to truly transform. She described this time:

> But during that time, James was really, really acting out and so people didn't see that part of our life. See, they see this life, and it's not. I mean, I knew it was just this, but what this was really, really stressful and, you know, he was, there were so many things he was doing, and so I did the tough love. So that's the stoic part of me. I was the tough love and so I didn't give up things and he knew he wouldn't get away with anything with me. Not one thing and he hated it and he would go after me in ways that you could not imagine. As a mom, if you talk about feeling broken, that's when I was probably at least ten, fifteen pounds lighter than I am now. I mean, I literally, it was heartbreaking how he would leave me these messages.

Susan's strength during this time is evident as she mothered James through an almost-overdose:

> And I thought, oh, my God…and then I said, 'I'm not going back to bed. I'm going to lay here with him. I can't, there's no way I'm going to be able to sleep'. So I held his hand and just laid there and then he would kind of wake up and he would go like this and go like this [gestures], you know, and be completely disoriented and out of it.

Since James's death, Susan's identity as his mother has transformed. She has renegotiated motherhood by finding a role, as James's voice, on the other side of her profound loss. She said:

> "I'm his voice now. Yeah. He doesn't have one, so I'm his voice. So, you know what? You better buck up, buttercup, because you've got to keep your son's memory alive and this is what needs to be done…and I need to stay focused on what my mission is. Again, not to be a lunatic about it, but to make sure that my, you know, that my son's memory

> stays alive… So like I say, we're his voice. He doesn't have one and we'll continue to just, you know, do what we need to do for him.

The spiritual sustenance that Susan uses in this renegotiated role as James's mother has also changed. James, as her beautiful little boy, is internalized and sustains her. Susan stated:

> Because you're not going to believe this. It hadn't rained or anything. In the front, there was this massive rainbow. Oh. I know. So I just feel like, you know, there's little gifts that I really treasure. I really treasure the gifts and they're little. You know, you see little hearts around every once in a while and they're gifts and that's what keeps me going and knowing that he's okay. He's okay now. He's not in pain anymore."

Susan has not only internalized James as a sustaining anchor, but she carries his affective experience as her own. For Susan, becoming James's voice also means feeling his despair:

> This is sad, like despair for him. I feel, now that I've become his voice, I feel what he felt. I really feel what he felt. I feel, because he didn't deserve it. So I feel despair, I feel sadness. A lot of what he felt, it's heartbreaking really, exhausting to carry that for so long. I'm always exhausted well, of course, because I'm carrying his load.

Winnicott (1963) described going-on-being as the continuity of simply being alive, productive, and moving forward in time. The catastrophic impingements of James's abuse, disclosure, and death shattered that continuity for Susan. Now, through the internalization of James as a life-sustaining good object and her identification with his experience, Susan has built a new way of going-on-being which is organized around a new purpose. She is still his mother, but she is now going-on-being as his mother in a way that manages her dread of being separated from him and her fear of a loss so complete that James would cease to exist in any form. Her

internalization of James defends against this anxiety. In this sense, Susan's renegotiated motherhood has something of what Freud (1917/1957) described as melancholia, in which the lost object is taken into the ego rather than relinquished. For Susan, however, this incorporation does not seem to be a failed mourning but a generative and purposeful act of going-on-being as James's mother. I felt this deeply in my countertransference to Susan, when I found myself with the strong desire to use James's actual nickname throughout my writing, and when I had the fantasy that Susan would send me one of the T-shirts bearing his childhood drawing which I would then wear while defending this dissertation. I understood both of these wishes as Susan's own desire to keep James remembered, real, and present in the world.

"From before to now, I'm like a completely different person."

The clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of Susan's son, James, caused a fundamental reconstruction of the way she understands her world. Bion's (1962) concept of K, the drive toward knowing and making contact with reality, and its opposite, - K, the active evacuation of meaning rather than its digestion, offer a lens for this category of meaning. As stated previously, Susan's Catholic environment produced a state of - K, not through any failure of intelligence but through a structure that systematically kept certain kinds of knowing outside the boundaries of what could be thought. James's disclosure forced a movement toward K, thus, toward contact with knowing that had been held outside awareness. What has followed is the slow, active, and sometimes disorienting work of learning to know what she now knows and of tolerating what that knowing reveals. Susan has taken on the action of educating herself and reconstructing her understanding of the Church. This category of meaning describes Susan's transformation in understanding.

The clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of her son has fundamentally and irreversibly altered Susan's worldview. Cognitively, she has moved from a state of structural not-knowing to a place of active, ongoing education and clear-eyed understanding. She relayed her starting point clearly and retrospectively, "I was so naive, I was such a cub, I was such an ignorant little girl. I thought the world was beautiful…I was a naive little Catholic girl, I'll tell you that much." Later in our conversations, she described the point at which she started to become more clear-eyed, "When I started to understand this, which was literally after James told us, so I was married with…kids and I was [middle-aged], I mean, come on."

Susan named the scope of her transformation repeatedly, "From before to now, I'm like a completely different person…Oh, my gosh, it's like night and day. It's literally night and day… Anyway, yeah, I am completely different. completely different. Yeah." She also shared how she has been transformed, "I've been really just educating myself a lot more," and has some regrets, "I don't know why I didn't educate myself about this earlier. I don't know. I just don't know. But it is what it is. I can't be hard on myself." She also described the feeling of empowerment this knowing has given her, "Like bring it on, like just let me out. I mean I have learned so much in the last few years since James passed…about all this."

She also shared a new understanding of the Church, especially as she observed her young grandchildren being raised in the faith. Speaking of one of her grandchildren, she said:

> They gave them scapulars. We used to have to wear them too. We had to wear the scapulars, or it was a mortal sin if we didn't, and [my grandchild's] teacher said that too…not to take it off..and my grandchild said [they] couldn't take it off to go

> [swimming], so I thought, 'We're really doing this? We're really doing this path?'…I was so upset about that."

Now, with this new understanding, she can say:

> It's just the grooming part and the Catholic guilt part. There's a lot of ugly, horrible emotions they throw on children, and children are innocent. They believe them and it leads to horrible acts, and so it's just a feeling of, yeah, it isn't a good feeling.

I asked her if there is a way she can make sense of all this and she said, "It's something you can't make sense of in any context." I then mentioned God's will and she quickly replied, "Oh, no, no. It's just no." Finally, with this new understanding, she also has self-compassion, "I can't be hard on myself…so I'm still learning, but I'm proud of myself for this journey."

Susan named the scope of her cognitive transformation simply and repeatedly when she said, "night and day" and "completely different" and "come on." Her words are not the words of someone who has arrived at a comfortable new understanding. They are the words of someone still surprised by the distance she has traveled from where she was. When she said, "bring it on" or "let me out," I could feel the movement toward K, or knowing. Susan is no longer organized around the requirements of a structure that made not-knowing a condition of belonging.

Winnicott (1965) would see this as the emergence of the *True Self*, which is a way of being that is organized around who one truly is, rather than around what the environment requires. Susan's words, "I can't be hard on myself" and "I'm proud of myself for this journey" suggest that she is not only thinking differently, but she is becoming someone different from who she was, and she knows it.

"I just felt like laying in bed all day…but that went away real fast."

Susan's cognitive transformation describes the reconstruction of her understanding and her transformation in agency describes what she has done with her new understanding. This category of meaning, transformation in agency, is organized around psychic processes. The first is what Klein (1940) describes as manic defenses, which are a way to unconsciously manage feelings such as sadness, anxiety, or guilt via activity. The second is Freud's concept of sublimation (1930/1961), which refers to the transformation of unbearable feelings or thoughts, such as rage or helplessness, into purposeful or directed action. Alongside these defenses, Klein's (1940) concept of reparation is relevant. Like many parents whose children have experienced abuse, Susan may carry a sense of guilt about what she could not prevent. She cannot undo this, but she can work toward ensuring it does not happen to other children.

Susan has changed from a person who absorbed everyone else's problems and kept everything contained to a woman who has found her voice, can create and hold boundaries, and is actively moving through the world as James's voice. This transformation in agency is told in her own words. She began to describe this metamorphosis by saying, "I always took care of everybody. I had to solve the problems, no matter what they were," but she also described a shift in how she understands her responsibility:

> I learned not to do that, to stop. Because I'm not responsible for other people. I'm not responsible for their actions and I'm not responsible for solving their problems or making their world fine. But it's taken a lot because that's how I was. Everybody's issues became mine and I had to solve them for them.

She has also taken responsibility for herself and for her own mission even in the face of grief and exhaustion:

> I mean, you could lay in bed all day after it happened. I felt like laying in bed all day, keeping the blinds closed and just not doing anything, but that went away real fast. We've got to carry on his mission we have to continue and we call it James's [voice] and that's what we're going to continue doing and it's been beautiful how many lives have been touched through him. So many. I just feel like we're making a difference. I feel like we're making a difference and it feels good, but it's also super exhausting. I just feel like I've been hit by a Mack truck. I do, but I won't stop.

Susan has also found agency in her refusal to be diminished, even in the face of the Catholic Church. Although she felt anxious and sick while attending Mass with her grandchildren, she described her feelings after the Mass:

> And we got back and the neighbors came over and we just had a really nice evening. It's not fair to, to ruin an evening because of somebody else's horrible act. I wasn't going to do that. This is us. This is who we are. This is what we, you know, stand for. And we're very close and supportive and if I would have just gone to bed, I mean, I was exhausted. I probably could have and it wouldn't have been okay. Then that meant that they got the justice and we didn't.

She is also exerting her agency in choosing to keep photos of James's apartment after he destroyed it while he was struggling. She is making an active and deliberate choice to preserve the evidence of what was. In keeping these photos, she is actively refusing to look away from what happened. She said, "I have before and after pictures, which I should delete. But anyway, I don't know why I don't delete all this stuff, but I didn't." I then asked her why she thought she had not deleted them and she responded, "I think because I want to remember. I want to

remember it because I want to tell myself and let myself know that he's no longer in this pain, because it was horrific."

The before and after pictures Susan keeps of James's apartment are significant to this category. When I asked her why she has not deleted them, she replied, "I want to remember, I want to tell myself he is no longer in this pain," suggesting that the transformation in agency also contains a capacity to bear witness and a refusal to look away from the damage. This is the depressive position breaking through the manic defenses, briefly but meaningfully, a moment in which action gives way to acknowledgment, and in which the anxiety about what was done and what could not be prevented is faced rather than avoided. The uncomfortable feelings that organize much of Susan's new relationship to the Church, for example, the claustrophobia, the feeling of needing a shower, and the anger that freezes her, are present but, transformed through sublimation and manic defense into forward momentum and mission. Susan is not unaware of what these defenses cost her as she said, "I just feel like I've been hit by a Mack truck. I do, but I won't stop." Her exhaustion is real, her refusal to stop is also real, and her transformation in agency exists in her refusal to stop in the face of exhaustion.

"I was so stoic."

Susan was formed, by Catholic culture and perhaps by temperament, into a person whose emotional life was organized around containment and performance rather than spontaneous feeling and expression. Bollas (1987) describes the *unthought known* as experience that is held in the body and in behavior but has never been symbolized or made thinkable. For Susan, the stoicism that defined her emotional presentation kept her affective life in this register. It was known somewhere, but it was not yet speakable and not yet thinkable. Winnicott (1965) would

understand this as a *False Self* structure, which is a reactive and compliant way of being that manages the environment and protects the True Self from a world that cannot safely receive it. Susan's Jackie O reference, as discussed in the next paragraph, describes the Catholic expectation of strength and composure in the face of suffering. The absence of anyone she felt she could truly confide in conspired to keep her True Self and its emotional life hidden, sometimes even from herself. Further, there was no container for what she carried. Bion (1962) describes the container and the contained as the relational condition within which emotional experience becomes thinkable. Without a container, the feelings remained unthought, and the stoicism remained necessary.

James's abuse and disclosure, and the experiences that followed, have opened Susan up being able to wholeheartedly feel and express her affective states. This category of meaning describes her emotional transformation. Susan described her stoic formation by saying, "But anyway, I think that, you know, it was kind of the Jackie O thing. You know, you don't show any emotion." For example, when her mother had a stroke, Susan thought, "I just thought I got to stay strong." Twice, she described her reaction in the face of crisis, "I tend to become a really different person when stuff like this happens. I mean, I have this inner strength and I just think, I just don't, I just, I'm just not emotional." and "When this sort of thing happens, I just have this weird shield of just thinking very logically and I know, not exactly, but I have an idea of how to handle it."

Susan described herself as stoic in even the most unbearable emotional moments, such as when James disclosed his abuse:

> I tried to always stay calm for him, which of course was gut-wrenching. I believed him in a second, I believed him in a second, like split second, right then, I believed him…but I just tried to stay calm and I tried not to get emotional, you know.

Later, when more specific memories of James's abuse surfaced, Susan described her reaction, "I thought this feels like the worst nightmare ever I mean this has got to be a nightmare and I didn't show any emotion. I just said we need to talk to our attorney." She further reflected on this moment:

> I was so stoic. Maybe I should have showed some emotion or something, he just told me something, it was the worst experience of his life and I didn't. I guess I was just trying so hard to be strong for him. I don't know. You do the best you can I guess. You don't really know how you are going to react when something like this happens.

Finally, Susan described the moment when she was told of James's death:

> When they said it, I just sat on the couch. I just sat there. I mean I guess maybe it was shock or I wasn't, I wasn't believing it, you know, I was just sitting there, like wait a minute, and you know as time goes on you realize you're never going to see them again, right, you're never. you're never going to laugh with them, you're never going to hug them. Nothing. But it was more just a complete numbness, I think. I just sat there. I didn't have emotion.

However, there was a private self beneath the numbness. Susan said, "I'm emotional a lot of times in bed at ten o'clock at night when I'm sobbing my eyes out by myself, but I try to stay strong for people." I replied, "It feels like in all this, there really wasn't a place for you to put your feelings." She confirmed this by saying:

> No, no there wasn't. I don't know if I really felt like I had anyone that I could confide in, to be quite honest. I have a lot of friends, good friends…but I didn't. It was such a turmoil and such a dark time, deep dark time that I couldn't confide in anyone, really tell them what was going on.

In the time since James's death, Susan's emotions have been breaking through as she has transformed in both understanding and agency. For example, she described how she felt at the Mass with her grandchildren:

> I wasn't expecting it. It was like claustrophobic, sick to my stomach, anxiety, like ugliness. Like I felt like I need to go take a shower when I get home. Like dirty. Yeah, all of it, just these overwhelming emotions I'd never felt and so I was feeling like I was going to start shaking or something. I don't know.

Here, Susan moved from being stoic and suffering privately to being able to experience and express a fuller emotional spectrum. This category of meaning expressed the aim of finding a place for feelings and finding a way to carry them without concealment. The affective transformation Susan is living through is incomplete, uneven, and ongoing. She knows this herself as her reference to "bumps in the road" suggests. However, there are emotions that are breaking through, such as the anger about injustice that freezes her, the claustrophobia inside the Church, and the overwhelming feelings she described as having never felt before. These feelings suggest that the unthought known is beginning to find its way into awareness and that the True Self is asserting itself as the False Self structure loosens under the weight of what Susan now knows and feels. Bion's (1962) concept of the container and contained is again relevant. The survivors' communities Susan has found, with people who know what she knows and feel what

she feels, or at least something similar, are functioning as containers in Bion's sense, and are making Susan's emotional experience more thinkable and more bearable by holding it alongside her. This is also what Kohut (1971) would describe as twinship selfobject functioning, which is the experience of feeling like another human being and of belonging to a community of people who share the same fundamental experience of the world. For Susan, who once had no place to put her feelings and who sobbed alone at ten o'clock at night, so that she could stay strong for everyone else, this twinship is key to her affective transformation. During our interviews, I found myself wanting to know more about what was happening internally and affectively for Susan. It felt as if she was more at home in James's story than in her own and more practiced at being his voice than at speaking in her own. I understood my wanting to know more as a countertransference response to the presence of what I am describing in this category of meaning, that is, the unthought known that her stoicism tried to keep just outside the reach of her full awareness, and as a registration of what Susan herself may be reaching toward as her affective transformation continues to unfold. Susan is still learning how to allow herself to feel.

Conclusion

These six categories of meaning capture the depth of Susan's lived experiences, as she shared them with me, and they point toward how Susan is making meaning of her experience. It is clear that to make meaning of an experience is not necessarily to make sense of it. Susan herself told me that what happened to James is something you cannot make sense of in any context. Rather, meaning making, for Susan, is the process by which she has found a way to go on, to organize her life around an experience that shattered her world as she previously understood it, and to locate within that rupture something that can be lived with and lived for.

For Susan, the meaning she has made of James's abuse and death is not a resolution or an acceptance. It is a direction. It is the meaning of James's [voice], with his voice carried forward, his name kept alive, and the stars she can look up at and know he is there. It is also, as these six categories of meaning show, a psychic journey of considerable depth and courage, from the structural not-knowing of total immersion, through the liminal space between two irreconcilable worlds, through the crucible of a renegotiated motherhood, and into a transformation of understanding, agency, and feeling that is ongoing and unfinished. Meaning making, in the relational psychoanalytic sense Desjardins (2022) describes, is not only a conscious process. It is unconscious, intersubjective, and co-constructed, and it is shaped by the relationships and formations that have made us who we are, and remade by the ruptures that force us to become someone different. Susan's meaning making has been shaped by her Catholic formation, by her love for James, by the decades of stoicism that kept her feelings without a home, and by the slow, hard work of finding a new way to be his mother after his death.

I want to close this section with Susan's own words. At the end of our final interview, I asked how our conversations together had felt for her. She considered my question and shared that it had been a positive experience:

> To be able to be reflective, you know, and just all of these happy memories with him. We used to sit outside at night on the grass because it was hot and try and find the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper and whoever found it first got the bigger scoop of ice cream, but I think about that and thinking about 'Mommy, I can't find it.' I can't find it you know, and then I think about the stars and that he's up there, you know, the biggest star in the universe. It's been wonderful to be able to reflect.

Case Two: Dorothy

General Information

Dorothy is a divorced single mother who is in her 70s. She is white. Dorothy has adult children and grandchildren. Dorothy is originally from a rural area of a southern state, and she eventually moved to a suburban area. She holds a PhD. She is currently a practicing Catholic and active in her parish and diocese.

Dorothy became a Catholic in her early teens and married a "cradle Catholic." She was less active in the Church during her marriage, but raised her children Catholic and has become more involved in the Church since her marriage ended. Since her son, Oscar, disclosed his abuse, she has, additionally, become involved in activities that are related to the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse crisis.

Being Catholic

Dorothy was not born into a Catholic family. Going back to her mother, she told me, "When my mother was, I think, in her late 30s, early 40s, her stepmother encouraged her to join the Church of Christ where the step-grandmother went and so she did." When Dorothy was in her early teens, her mother told her, "It's time for you to join a church." Dorothy remembered:

> I said, 'Oh, well, I want to be Catholic.' I'd been watching *The Song of Bernadette* and a lot of Bing Crosby movies where he was a priest and I was just drawn to it, really drawn into it, at the time, all the wrong reasons for becoming Catholic. I was immensely impressed, and this was pre-Vatican II. I was impressed with all the Psalms and rites of

> passage, the things that you do in the church, kneeling and the standing and the sitting and the rosaries and that sort of thing. So I was deeply, deeply interested in becoming Catholic and so I did.

A priest set her up with a Catholic girl who was about her age and the two girls would review the Baltimore Catechism:

> Who made us? God made us. Why did God make us? God made us to love and serve him. So I went through the whole book and every so often, Father would ask me to come in and talk to him and he would ask some questions to see if I was getting the gist of it. Now, to be honest with you, that was pre-Vatican II. The process now is much better because it's really going more in depth about theology and we just kind of hit the high spots when you do the Baltimore Catechism.

Dorothy was then baptized into the Catholic Church as an adolescent. When Dorothy's family moved to another area of her state, "I used to walk to Mass and usually had to stay after Mass for [religious education]."

After Dorothy's husband left her and the children, she described her involvement in the Church as minimal:

> Not the way I am now. I went to church, I did serve on the parish council once or twice, but that became very difficult and it ended up, one guy actually asked me to resign because I was not going to leave my kids at night for a meeting that I didn't know how long it would last. My kids were still little.

Now, she said, “I’m a Eucharistic minister. I read either the first or second reading. I’ve served on this parish council…I became very, very active in the church I’m in now.” Dorothy has also made spiritual retreats with the church.

Oscar

> Dorothy lovingly described Oscar as a child:
>
> He’s always been a little smart aleck, the high energy child. He’s a type A plus personality…at church, he’s the one at Easter when they come around and sprinkle you with holy water, he’s the one who said, ‘Watch it, you’re getting my hair wet’ and and just things like that, they just popped out of his mouth.

In high school, ‘he was very popular…he was very well liked.” Yet she reflected:

> And I wondered for a long time after he admitted it, how much of that was masking the pain he was feeling?…and I think how much of what Oscar was going through was he feeling and not willing to express and so he kind of put people off by being this extra energy [kind of person].

Oscar is currently married, has children and a professional career. He is no longer a practicing Catholic, but Dorothy said, “He’s leaning toward it. I keep thinking he might come back. It’s up to him.”

The Disclosure

Oscar was abused by a Catholic priest when he was an early adolescent. When he was in late adolescence, this priest was accused of abusing other boys. The accusations became common knowledge in Dorothy’s parish community, so she let Oscar know, she told him:

> [the priest is having legal troubles]. I just want you to know that…now the other thing you need to think about is that when you come home, because you've been close to [this priest], people are going to make assumptions or they're going to ask, and maybe you have to deal with this.

Oscar then opened up to his girlfriend and told her he had been sexually abused by this priest before he came home and told Dorothy.

When Dorothy and Oscar spoke of what had happened, Dorothy asked Oscar, "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me you didn't want to go see [the priest]?" and Oscar said, "'If I had told you I didn't want to go, you would have asked me why and I didn't want to lie to you. I just went ahead and went.'" Dorothy further reflected:

> I don't think it came as a complete surprise because he had been going to [the priest's place] and by the time he told me, people knew that [that priest] was in the process of being defrocked or they were trying to defrock him and they gave him like a payout and Oscar had actually gone to [the priest's place] that the Church helped him buy so he (the priest) could live away from a parish. But I just, I was like, I wish I'd been more forceful because he wouldn't have lied to me. He would have told me if I'd been more forceful about, you know, if you don't want to go, don't go.

After the Disclosure

After the disclosure, Oscar was offered therapy by the bishop, but it took him a few years to accept the offer. When he did, the Church paid for it. Dorothy changed parishes after a church representative at her original parish gave testimony that protected the parish and suspect priest. She said:

> I can't stay in this church and look at [the person who protected the church and priest] and know that [they] tried to save the church…by lying under oath that [the priest] was [at events with children]. I said, 'I just can't do it.' So I moved churches.

She then reiterated this:

> Everybody at [that parish] knew what had happened. Everybody. And the nun there, who's even more obnoxious than I am, was very defensive and I finally said, 'I just can't do it. I can't do it. I can't see you people and know that you knew what happened and that, to some extent, you actually subconsciously knew what was going on and did nothing about it.'

Dorothy changed parishes, and met and became close to a priest, who she described as her spiritual mentor and who eventually officiated Oscar's wedding. Dorothy said, "so that's a positive interaction after that super negative one." Finally, Dorothy summed up with:

> It took a while for me to feel really good about the church after Oscar opened up. But luckily, I met up with [the priest who is her spiritual mentor] and, luckily, Oscar did get help…Oscar is a poster child for how you can survive. How you can move past it and go on to something else. As a father of [x] children and a respected [professional].

Telling Her Story

I directly asked Dorothy why she is participating in this research. Her response was, "If I can be useful to someone else, if what I went through can help someone else come to terms, I'd like to be able to do that." She then mentioned that she is certain there are other boys who were abused by the same priest that abused Oscar, but who have not come forward. She said, "and if for some reason I can help their mothers, if and when they ever come forward."

Pseudonyms

Dorothy picked pseudonyms for herself and her son. Although the names "Dorothy" and "Oscar" have personal meaning for her, she also pointed out that they honor Dorothy Day and Oscar Romero, who were both Catholic advocates for social justice. Oscar Romero is now a saint and the quote, "There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried" is attributed to him (Romero, 1988/2004).

My Experience of Dorothy

Dorothy was open about her experiences and was easy to speak to. At no time was it difficult to retrieve additional information from her. It was my impression that she has not shared her story openly in some time, and I was struck by her willingness to open herself up for my study and to provide me with so much detail. It was easier for me to access the facts of her experiences than with the affective language that connects to it. After our initial screening phone call, Dorothy scheduled our first interview, but until she actually joined me on that virtual call, about a week later, I kept having the fantasy that she was going to no-show. During our second conversation, I noticed the feeling of paralysis. Even though I wanted to cover a few more topics, for my part, I did not want to interrupt her to redirect her.

Categories of Meaning

Five categories of meaning arose from Dorothy's interviews. These five categories reflect Dorothy's chosen relationship to her Catholic faith, a description of how she has remained a practicing Catholic by splitting the good and bad aspects of the Church, the way she has kept her Catholic faith separate from the institutional Church, and the internal nature of her identity as a Catholic. The final category of meaning is a description of how, in real time, as we spoke, the

container of the research interview allowed some of Dorothy's unconscious feelings to surface as metaphor. These categories of meaning all describe different and simultaneous dimensions of the position she holds presently. To keep each category grounded in her experience, I used a single quote from Dorothy to uniquely title each category of meaning.

"I was deeply, deeply interested in becoming Catholic and so I did."

Freud's structural theory understood the psyche as having three parts, the id, the ego and the superego (1923/1961). The ego, using the reality principle, mediates between the gratifying impulses of the id and the internalized moral standards of the superego. In turn, ego strength refers to the ego's capacity to adapt to the reality of the outside world and deal with the stress of managing the id and superego. Dorothy displayed ego strength in the face of her son's abuse disclosure, but it is apparent that this ego strength had developed long before this time and is interwoven in the way she has made meaning of Oscar's abuse. Her ego strength is present in the fact that, first, as a young teenager, she chose Catholicism in an environment where "there's not even a Catholic Church in my parents' hometown." This ability to consciously and actively choose Catholicism organized the choices she has made about her religion and faith ever since that initial decision. She assesses, decides and owns her choices, including her choice to remain with the faith that betrayed her son and herself. She neither moves into denial nor does she become avoidant. Dorothy is someone who asserts her agency through deliberate choice in many domains, such as in her faith and relationship to Catholicism, her relationships to others, and even during her interviews for this project.

Dorothy's relationship to Catholicism has always been actively and consciously chosen and much of her dialogue pointed to Catholicism as a choice as a category of meaning. Dorothy

chose to become Catholic in adolescence, even though she was drawn in by something she now recognizes as naive. She has made choices about her relationship to the Church ever since. She chose to be less active during her marriage, to become more involved as a single mother, and to change parishes after the disclosure, "I can't stay in this church…so I moved churches." Ultimately, she made the conscious choice to remain Catholic despite everything. Her Catholicism is a chosen identity.

Initially, she chose Catholicism in a naive way, as she described herself:

> I'd been watching the *The Song of Bernadette* and a lot of Bing Crosby movies where he was a priest and I was just drawn to it, really drawn into it, at the time, all the wrong reasons for becoming Catholic.

There was not even a Catholic Church in her parents' hometown and nothing in her external environment pointed her toward Catholicism. She reached for it anyway and the process of becoming Catholic was itself a series of chosen steps. A priest set her up with a Catholic girl her own age to lead her through the Baltimore Catechism, "Who made us? God made us. Why did God make us? God made us to love and serve him. So I went through the whole book." She added, "To be honest with you, that was pre-Vatican II. The process now is much better because it's really going more in depth about theology and we just kind of hit the high spots when you do the Baltimore Catechism." Even in describing her own Catholic formation, Dorothy assesses and evaluates, and notes what was insufficient, and what has improved.

She exerts this agency also when she chooses to be less active in the Church while she is married. Later, she actively chose to be with her young children over attending a parish meeting, "I was not going to leave my kids at night for a meeting that I didn't know how long it would

last. My kids were still little." After a Catholic spiritual retreat, Dorothy is asked to do several things related to deepening her faith such as, saying the Rosary, attending an extra Mass each week, and finding a spiritual mentor. Here, rather than being unquestioningly compliant, she makes conscious choices about what she will and will not do, "and so there were several things I could do, but the extra Mass was not."

Dorothy chose a priest as her spiritual mentor, and one of the things that she admires in him is his own emphasis on choice:

> One of the things that I think has made Father [X] work for me as a spiritual [mentor] is that he went to see *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and, of course, Christian communities were boycotting it and they were trying to convince him not to go into the movie and he said, 'if it's okay with you, I would like to see this movie and make up my own mind.'

Thus, she chose a mentor who holds her value of making her own choices over conforming to the institutional Church.

After Oscar disclosed that he had been abused by a priest, Dorothy, with open eyes, deliberately chose to stay in the Church in the aftermath of this great betrayal, although she said, "It took me a while to feel really good about the Church after Oscar opened up, but luckily, I met up with [her spiritual mentor], and luckily, Oscar did get help." She has maintained that choice ever since, "It was never in my mind not to continue to go to church and I've never really been interested in any Protestant church. I guess I'm still caught up in Bing Crosby."

Dorothy's pattern of deliberate choice goes beyond her relationship to Catholicism into her relationships. After her husband left, she chose to maintain a cordial relationship with him, "I have a decent relationship with him and his fourth wife or fifth. We're not sure." When she

began dating again and discovered that a man she was seeing had been unfaithful to his first wife, her decision was immediate and final, “I said, ‘I can’t be with someone who isn’t faithful. Sorry.’”

She showed the same certainty of choice when she changed parishes:

> I can’t stay in this church and look at [a parishioner who protected the church and priest] and know that [they] tried to save the church…by lying under oath that [the priest] was not [at events with children]. I said, ‘I just can’t do it.’ So I moved churches.

She also shows certainty in choosing the aspects of her faith that are meaningful to her, “a lot of priests are indeed using old prayers and that annoys me because they’re trying to drag us back to the old time….I’m not interested in that. I’m interested in being Catholic.”

Dorothy told me an anecdote that perfectly illustrates how she chooses to carry her Catholicism in a chosen and internal manner. She saw her ex-husband and said:

> I said, ‘Are you wearing a rosary?’ He said, ‘Yes, and a scapular’. I was like, ‘They’re not really jewelry’. He had it around his neck under his shirt, but I could tell from the beads that it was probably a rosary. And then he said, ‘and a scapular.’ I was like, okay. I mean, if that’s what you want to do, I’ve got scapulars. I don’t wear them. I carry them in my purse. I carry my rosary.

Dorothy chooses to carry her faith internally and not as a showy external presentation.

I felt the importance of choice to Dorothy in my countertransference. My fantasy that Dorothy might not show up for our first interview was an unconscious registration that she truly felt she could choose to be or not be a part of this study. My experience of a sort of paralysis in

another interview was an awareness that she would speak to me on her own terms and chose what she wanted to share and when during our conversations.

Kohut (1971) postulated that for a healthy cohesive self and a sense of agency to develop, primary narcissism must be transformed, in part, so that external affirmation is less needed. Dorothy's ability to make deliberate and value-based choices, even in the face of betrayal, suggests this developmental achievement as well as the ego strength that underlies it. The faith Dorothy holds now is not the naive faith of the teenager drawn in by *The Song of Bernadette*. It is now something that is more fully chosen and more fully held.

"I only thought about the priest. I don't think about the Church."

Klein (1946) described splitting as the early defensive operation by which the psyche keeps the good and the bad separate in order to protect the good object from being contaminated or destroyed by the bad. In its more primitive form, splitting occurs in the paranoid-schizoid position to keep one's world divided into good and bad and without the capacity to hold both together or, more simply put, without the ability to see complexity and both the good and the bad aspects of everything we are in relationship with. Splitting can also operate in more sophisticated and adaptive ways, as a type of differentiation that allows a person to remain in relationship with a complex object, one that contains both good and bad, without being overwhelmed by the bad or blinded by the good. For Dorothy, remaining Catholic required both forms of this operation. This category of meaning describes how Dorothy used a defensive type of splitting that physically and psychically removed her from proximity to the bad objects in the Church and preserved her Catholic identity.

After Oscar's disclosure, Dorothy defensively, and in protection of her own Catholicism, split the people connected to the Church and split the physical places that were connected to the Church. When a Church representative at the parish where Dorothy has raised her children gave testimony that protected the parish and the priest who abused Oscar, Dorothy could not stay. She did not leave the Church, but she did leave one parish for another. She made a precise and deliberate distinction. The first parish and the person associated with it who lied to protect it were bad objects that had to be split from the new parish and the people there. Further, Dorothy said:

> Everybody at [the first parish] knew what had happened. Everybody. And the nun there, who's even more obnoxious than I am, was very defensive and I finally said, 'I just can't do it. I can't do it. I can't see you people and know that you knew what happened and that, to some extent, you actually subconsciously knew what was going on and did nothing about it.'

The repetition of "I just can't do it" and "I can't" three times in succession, is the splitting verbalized in the boundary that Dorothy set in that statement.

Dorothy's splitting also operated at the level of individual clergy figures. For her, not all priests are bad objects. Father [X], her spiritual mentor, is a good object. Dorothy recognized and chose him as someone with independent thinking and personal integrity. Bishop [X] is another good object, he is a Church authority who proved himself through his zero tolerance stance and his willingness to speak directly, "Oh yeah, Bishop [X] is fabulous...I fell in love with him immediately as our bishop." The literal words of falling in love are words of idealization of this good object. However, Dorothy's trust of Bishop [X] and Father [X] are not naive. She said, "I

want to trust Pope Leo. But again, until you prove it to me, and Bishop [X] has proven it, by coming out and speaking and talking about a no-nonsense, zero-tolerance policy, I cannot respect him." For Dorothy, good objects in the Catholic Church must prove themselves by demonstrating that they are trustworthy.

This splitting also extended to Dorothy's understanding of the abuse itself, "I never blame. I don't know why this is, and it makes me think about myself. I only thought about the priest. I don't think about the Church." Dorothy noticed her own splitting with the same thoughtfulness that characterizes her self-observations. She located the abuse in a man rather than in the institution, and she commented on this with self-reflection rather than with defensiveness. The priest is the bad object, not the Church. This separation made it possible for her to remain a practicing Catholic.

Another story also shows this splitting. Dorothy said:

> Father [X] would come over here [to mentor me] rather than me trying to get him at the parish and [my grandchild], all of four, five, six, would want Father [X] to come upstairs and watch Tom and Jerry or watch SpongeBob SquarePants. And I would come upstairs and [my grandchild] would say, 'no, [grandma] you can go downstairs'. And I was like, 'I will not go downstairs. I don't want you to mention to somebody that Father [X] came up to your room and watched SpongeBob or Tom and Jerry and think something's going on. So you'll have to be able to tell them [my grandma] and Father [X] and I watched'. And I said, 'Because I don't want to ruin his reputation'. Let's just be honest, I might have been just a little bit skeptical of leaving my grandson alone. Especially when he got closer to the [age] when Oscar was abused.

Dorothy trusted Father [X], but she also did not leave her grandson alone with him. These two positions were true simultaneously. Dorothy was both splitting and integrating, as she held the good object as good, alongside the reality of what some priests can do that is bad. Dorothy suggested that this position took a while to evolve, "It took a while for me to feel really good about the church after Oscar opened up. But luckily, I met up with Father [X] and luckily, Oscar did get help." The good objects she was able to find and hold separate from the bad ones made remaining a practicing Catholic possible.

"I don't have any faith in the men in the church. I think all of them are vulnerable. I have faith in the theology and until we get a Pope that ignores theology, I can feel Catholic."

This category of meaning describes how Dorothy distinguished between the theology and the human institution of the Church as another way of remaining Catholic after Oscar's disclosure. This distinction allowed for a differentiation between the Church as a human institution, with frailty, corruption, and failure, and the theology that the institution is supposed to embody but failed at embodying in terms of the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse crisis. This distinction is not a rationalization, although Dorothy herself raised that possibility, "Maybe it's rationalization, but I was able to say, it's not the theology of the church that bothers me. It's the behavior of some of the men and granted, they're supposed to be more balanced, but they're not." The willingness to name the possibility of rationalization and then hold her position anyway is itself more evidence of her ego strength.

The pre and post-Vatican II Church was a part of her distinction, "And of course, the other thing is after Vatican II, it was a whole new church because the priest was facing us."

Vatican II dictated that priests no longer said Mass with their backs turned to their parishioners. The priest turning to face the congregation was a symbolic repositioning of the clergy in relation to the faithful and it aligned with Dorothy's theology. Dorothy was clear about her opinion of a movement to restore some pre-Vatican II practices, "A lot of priests are indeed using old prayers and that annoys me because they're trying to drag us back to the old time…I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in being Catholic." She also said, "I wish they didn't drag us back to the first Eucharistic prayer that's just in there because it's the oldest." Dorothy knew which prayer she was referring to and why this change bothered her. She was not complaining, instead, she was making an argument for the type of church she could believe in.

Dorothy made her most overt statement of the faith versus institution distinction when she reflected on how Oscar's disclosure affected her relationship to the Church:

> It didn't change my relationship because I was able to say, it's not the theology of the church that bothers me. It's the behavior of some of the men and granted, they're supposed to be more balanced, but they're not.

She understood the men who represent the Church as imperfect humans and the Church's theology as separate from these humans. She added:

> I've forgiven. Yeah. I have. Because I've seen what happened with my spiritual [mentor] saying, you need a whole bunch of other people to deal with these things and realizing that they just didn't have the structures in place to cope in their human frailty…that's not theological. That's human.

Dorothy forgave, not through denial or minimization, but through her compassion and an understanding of the difference between the theological values that the Church claims to

represent and what the men within it actually do. She further demonstrated this distinction when I asked her if there is any way she can make sense of what happened to Oscar within the context of her faith. She answered, "no…no, I can't." She was clear that she could not integrate the human betrayal with the theology of the Church.

The distinction that Dorothy made requires ongoing and active work to sustain, which I imagine she does with the ego strength and chosen agency that she used to choose Catholicism to begin with. This work has allowed Dorothy to remain inside her Catholic faith, to remain involved in the institution that betrayed her and her son, and to find within that institution the clergy, such as her mentor, Father [X], who embody what she believes the Church can and should be.

Dorothy split Catholic theology from the patriarchal institution of the Church in one respect, but the distinction she made is also a form of what Klein (1940) described as the achievement of the depressive position. This capacity allowed her to hold the complexity of an object that is neither all good nor all bad, to love what is worth loving and refuse what is not, all without letting either destroy the other. Dorothy's solution is neither to stay and pretend nothing had happened, nor to leave and abandon the faith she has chosen. She chose to remain Catholic by separating what she wishes to keep from what she can no longer hold.

"I have faith in having read theology on my own after I became Catholic."

For Dorothy, Catholicism was not primarily an external or institutional identity. It was something within her and this identity was created through the movies she watched when she was young, her own reading and reflection, and her thinking about and studying theology, which she has done alone, through retreat, and in discussion with her mentor. This category of meaning

describes Dorothy's Catholic identity and how it is so thoroughly and completely her own that institutional failures cannot reach it.

Kohut (1971) described selfobjects as people, objects, or experiences that provide necessary psychological functions that one needs to develop and maintain a cohesive and stable sense of self. Initially, these functions are provided externally, by caregivers, but as a strong self develops, they can additionally be self-provided. The selfobjects needed to maintain one's sense of self-cohesion are mirroring, idealizing and twinship. For many Catholics, it is reasonable to think that the Church provides selfobject functioning, as it responds positively to needs for recognition, security and protection, and belonging. When a primary selfobject fails catastrophically, as the Church did for the families of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse victims, the result is what Kohut describes as selfobject collapse, which is a profoundly destabilizing disruption to one's sense of self.

For Dorothy, however, the Church has never been the primary selfobject for her faith. Her faith was mainly internally generated and internally located, which has made it resilient to this institutional betrayal in a way that a more externally dependent faith could not be. The selfobject functions that the Church provided were secondary to the faith Dorothy built from the inside through her own reading and reflection. This fact protected her sense of self as a Catholic in the face of institutional betrayal.

Dorothy stated directly where her faith comes from, "I have faith in having read theology on my own after I became Catholic. It's the theology that attracts me." She did not receive her theological understanding passively and without thought. She pursued it independently and by choice. She owned her faith because she went to find it herself, rather than waiting for the

institution or her family system to deliver it. When she studied the Baltimore Catechism, she recognized its limitations immediately:

> Now, to be honest with you, that was pre-Vatican II. The process now is much better because it's really going more in depth about theology and we just kind of hit the high spots when you do the Baltimore Catechism.

The interior quality of Dorothy's faith was also visible in how she carried her physical sacred objects. When she encountered her ex-husband wearing his rosary and scapular visibly around his neck, she noted the difference between his relationship to these physical religious objects and her own, "I've got scapulars. I don't wear them. I carry them in my purse. I carry my rosary." Her ex-husband displayed his Catholicism externally, on his body, for others to see. Dorothy carried hers privately, inside her bag, where they were present, but not displayed to all who saw her. Her faith was real, but it belonged primarily to her interior life rather than to her public presentation. This small physical detail captured something essential about Dorothy's Catholicism as internal. Dorothy's faith does not need to be seen by others to be real and it does not need the institution's validation to be hers, but it is carried instead within her.

The names that Dorothy chose as pseudonyms for Oscar and herself illuminate this interior Catholicism from a historical and theological perspective. Dorothy Day (1952) and Oscar Romero (1988/2004) were both Catholics whose faith was deeply personal and interior and organized around their own direct encounter with what the Gospel demands, rather than around institutional compliance. Both of these Catholic figures were in tension with institutional authority at various points in their lives and both remained inside the Church, not because the institution validated them but because their faith was located somewhere the institution could not

reach. Further, *The Song of Bernadette*, the film that first drew Dorothy to Catholicism as a teenager, tells St. Bernadette's story. St. Bernadette's visions were inside of her. They were her own direct experience of the sacred that the Church initially refused to validate (Harris, 1999). Interestingly, Dorothy had been drawn, from the very beginning, to a model of faith that is personally owned, internally located, and independent of institutional endorsement.

The result of this interior faith was a Catholic identity that even Oscar's abuse by a priest could not destroy. Dorothy stated, "It didn't change my relationship because I was able to say, it's not the theology of the church that bothers me. It's the behavior of some of the men." The relationship Dorothy described here is not her relationship to the institution, but her relationship to the faith itself, to the theology she had studied and made her own. That relationship did not change because it was not primarily mediated by institutional Catholicism in the first place. It was always between Dorothy and the theology, which she internally held and personally owned.

Dorothy expressed how internal her Catholicism is when she told me, "Until we get a pope that ignores theology, I can feel Catholic." The word "feel" conveyed her internal experience of being Catholic. Dorothy did not say this in terms of belonging to the Catholic Church, she described it as feeling Catholic. Her faith is felt internally and Dorothy can feel it or not feel it, depending on whether the institution remains faithful to the theology. The institution could fail and Dorothy could still feel Catholic because feeling Catholic is something that happened inside of her, and it is not something the Catholic institution gave her or could take away from her.

Winnicott (1958) described what he termed "the capacity to be alone," as a paradoxical achievement. That is, it is a developmental achievement that allows one the emotional strength to

feel secure, be creative, and feel metaphorically held while alone. This capacity is built during early life and comes with experiences of being alone in the presence of a supportive caregiver. It includes the ability to exist without external validation. Dorothy's interior Catholicism has something of this quality. She does not need the institution to validate her faith in order to sustain it. She does not need the men in the Church to be trustworthy in order to feel Catholic. She has internalized the theology in such a way that it sustains her from within and is monumentally resistant to outside forces.

"I've clipped all I can clip and it really needs a chainsaw."

Despite Dorothy's usual straightforward and honest manner when speaking of her experiences around Oscar's abuse, she sometimes spoke in metaphor when she shared seemingly unrelated stories with me. This manner of speaking seemed to be her way of handling the unbearable or unformulated aspects of her experience that are not fully resolved. Bollas' (1987) concept of the unthought known describes experience and feeling that is held unconsciously, before it can be made fully thinkable or spoken. For Dorothy, the impact of Oscar's abuse, the Church's betrayal, and its aftermath exists in this register. It is known to her in some way, but it is thinkable and speakable only in a displaced or vague manner.

Bion's (1962) concept of the container and the contained is also relevant. Emotional experience becomes thinkable when it is held by a containing mind that metabolizes it and returns it in a more digested form. The cleaning out stories and other imagery that form this category of meaning are Dorothy's way of creating containers for what cannot yet be said directly. These containers gave form and shape to an experience that resists full symbolization.

Our two interviews took place approximately a week and a half apart. The first interview, perhaps, brought Dorothy into close contact with memories she had not thought of, in detail, for some time. It is psychoanalytically significant is that she shared these metaphorical stories at the very beginning of our next and final interview. Dorothy logged to this interview and described spending part of the previous week on a short road trip and the remainder of it having some work done on her house. She spent the early morning, of the day we met, cleaning. It was my sense that the first interview had brought the unthought known closer to the surface, and stirred up material that had been held deep within her, but that had not yet been processed, and that the domestic activity of the intervening week was Dorothy's psyche's attempt to contain and manage what had been opened up. As within the consulting room, the patient's opening material is not necessarily small talk. In this vein, Dorothy's opening stories were indicative of what she was grappling with. She began by mentioning the road trip she had taken, "and in driving up there, after having talked to you, there were a lot of…" She did not finish the sentence, but let it trail off before she mentioned a priest who was found guilty in the area where she was driving. She then told me twice that she was feeling "cranky."

She continued by describing a rhododendron in her garden that had been bent by one storm over the winter, and further bent and cracked by a second. She said:

> It's like I've got a rhododendron that got bent over by an ice storm and further bent by the second ice storm, and it's now cracked in a limb. And I've clipped all I can clip and it really needs a chainsaw to take out the limb or maybe the whole tree.

This image was almost too perfect as a metaphor for what had happened to Dorothy's world. She was describing storms that bend and crack, but do not destroy. She was telling me that she had

clipped what she can clip, but that there was damage beyond what can be clipped out. This damage actually required a chainsaw, and the question of whether to take out the limb or maybe the whole tree, is a question Dorothy has been living with. In keeping the tree so far, she has stayed in the Church, but the cracked limb is still there and she knows it. It seemed that the cracked rhododendron had been waiting to be spoken about. The first interview brought it close enough to the surface that it could be described, disguised as a gardening frustration, in the opening moments of our final conversation.

She told me a second, seemingly random story right after she discussed the rhododendron. Dorothy described a frustration with something she had ordered:

> I ordered a container to put water in in the fridge and cycle out impurities and a brush cleaner for glasses, and I got elderberry and a pair of like middle school ankle socks, and I was just, what in the hell is going on here?

The Church was unwilling to cycle out the impurities itself, and it has tried to thwart attempts from the outside to clean it up. The institution that was supposed to purify and sanctify, to filter out what is harmful, and deliver what is clean and nourishing, instead contaminated the faithful. The holy water of the Catholic Church is impure. Dorothy's reaction, "What in the hell is going on here", was the same disorientation she must have felt when the institution revealed itself to be the source of harm rather than the protection against it. This anecdote, along with the image of the rhododendron, suggested that the first interview had opened up a way for the unthought known to be expressed, through stories of household frustrations, because it could not yet be spoken of directly.

The household repairs that Dorothy had undertaken in the week between interviews were the third expression of the cleaning out theme. She reported:

> We had repairmen running in and out of here all of last week. New door, new sliding glass door, that has a double lock. New blinds for the windows because the blinds that I had were Venetian blinds and they've been on the windows forever and they're so hard to clean that I just got rid of them and put these new ones up. And so I've spent early morning today cleaning the windows on the top and all these places that hadn't been cleaned in a while.

Dorothy opened herself up in the first interview and her response in the next week was to make her home more secure, harder to enter, and cleaner. The double lock on the new sliding glass door is striking. She spent a week making her home more difficult to enter after an interview in which she had opened herself up to a researcher she has just met. The Venetian blinds, which were too hard to clean, were replaced with new ones and the windows were cleaned in places that had not been cleaned in a while. Dorothy's physical environment was secured and purified in response to the first interview.

My experience of paralysis in the second interview and my own inability to interrupt and redirect the conversation, was a countertransference response in parallel to this securing. Dorothy unconsciously directed the conversation and protected herself in the same way she protected her home with the new door and double locks. Even in the research relationship, Dorothy was cleaning things out and securing things on her own terms.

Interestingly, Dorothy mentioned worms three times during our conversations. I associate the way a worm moves through the soil and aerates it as a type of cleaning out. The first time

Dorothy mentioned worms, it was as an idiom and in the context of discussing families who moved away from the parish where the abuse occurred, “I mean, it opens a can of worms.” The second mention felt raw and visceral and occurred after her story about the incorrect delivery and her comment, “And I was just, what in the hell is going on here?” Dorothy then said, “It’s kind of surreal. I don’t think it. Nobody does. Everybody hates me. I’m going to eat some worms. I just feel like that’s what’s going on.” Her sudden move into a childhood song that describes rejection and feeling unloved perhaps revealed feelings underneath her matter-of-fact demeanor. Unknowingly, she referenced the unthought known when she said, “I don’t think it.” Underneath what Dorothy built and maintained, there was the feeling of sitting alone on the playground and being cast out. Perhaps Dorothy was telling me how it feels to hold her faith simultaneously with knowing about the betrayal of the institutional Church.

Dorothy also mentioned worms when I pointed out the slow arriving spring in my location and told her that my daffodils have not bloomed yet. She replied, “Mine have already bloomed and decided they’re tired of the worms.” My association to this image is that Dorothy, herself, is tired of the clergy-worms churning below the surface of the Church. To call someone a “worm” is an insult that implies they are a coward or that they have poor morals.

Finally, Dorothy has been keeping a physical archive of the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse crisis, such as newspaper clippings and related materials that she has accumulated since Oscar’s disclosure. When Oscar’s wife suggested that she throw them away before Oscar has to clean them out, Dorothy replied, “I think he’ll come in and just throw stuff out. He’s not interested in reading through stuff I’ve got.” She did not agree to get rid of them in the present, but handed the task over to Oscar, in the future, when he can do it in his own time and in his own

way. The physical record stays for now as Dorothy's form of witness, and as her way of refusing to let the record disappear. She is not yet ready to clean it out herself.

Bion (1962) understood the container as something that made unthinkable experience thinkable and what transformed raw emotional experience into something that can be metabolized and lived with. Dorothy's cleaning out stories were her containers, or the forms through which an unthought known found its way toward expression without being directly articulated. These metaphors as containers arrived after the first interview had brought the unthought known closer to the surface. This suggests that the research relationship itself functioned as a container for Dorothy, a space in which what she had been holding could, carefully and on her own terms, find its way toward consciousness.

Conclusion

These five categories of meaning captured the depth of Dorothy's lived experiences, as she shared them with me. To make meaning of an experience is not necessarily to make sense of it. Dorothy herself stated that what happened to Oscar is something you can't make sense of in any context. Rather, meaning making is the psychological process by which a person finds a way to go on being, to organize their life around an experience that has shattered their world, as it was previously understood, and to locate within that rupture something that can be lived with and lived for. For Dorothy, the meaning she has made is not a resolution or an acceptance. It is a position, inside a faith she chose and keeps choosing, which is inside an institution she has learned to inhabit with open eyes.

I close this section with Dorothy's own words. When I asked her what she most wanted me to understand about her experience, she told me, "the aura is always there. The impact of

what happened, even if you try to tamp it down, things bring it back to life. Things will come back and bite you in the backside."

Case Three: Cara

General Information

Cara is in her 80s, or as she said, "I'm an oldie, but I hope a goodie." She spent part of her life in the eastern half of the country, before moving to a state in the western half of the United States. She and her son's father divorced while he was young. Cara presently lives in a suburban setting. She is white, re-married and holds a PhD. She was born and raised Catholic, and grew up in an urban setting. She formally left the Church after her son disclosed his abuse by a Catholic priest.

Cara is retired after a successful professional career. Her son, James, has special needs as well as chronic physical health conditions. Despite this, he has obtained both an undergraduate degree and Master's degree. Cara actively advocates for the resources and supports that he needs. She attends support groups for those affected by Catholic clergy abuse.

Being Catholic

Cara's Catholic upbringing is best described in her own words:

> Growing up Catholic was intense as far as not only our belief, you know, internalized everything that the church teachings pounded into our heads. But we lived it. You know, we lived a half a block from the church, right across the alley from the convent. So we were immersed in Catholicism, even in our environment, our living environment. So

there was really no way to even get around it. It was a part of our belief system, and it was a part of our daily lives. You know, we had the Knights of Columbus bringing the Statue of Mary into the living room and had all of the friends and neighbors come in and pray the rosary. You know, it was intense. There really wasn't much of my life that didn't include Catholicism in one way or another. You know, celebrating the religious holidays. Just every time something happened, if it was good or bad, it had something connected to do with God and religion. You know, we're thanking God. We are asking God for support and help. This is God, no matter how bad something was, this is what God wants. And so we accept it and work with it, no matter how miserable we feel.

Likewise, Cara's education was fully at Catholic schools, "of course, I went to a Catholic school…I went to a Catholic high school. I went to a Catholic college in a convent. I went to a graduate school in a Catholic…university." Cara was so steeped in Catholicism that it even played into her feelings about becoming a mother, "I felt thrilled and excited at being a mother because that's what a Catholic girl does when she grows up, especially [from my ethnic background], you know. You know, you get married, you have children."

Cara raised her son Catholic. She said:

Well, you know, it just felt normal. You know, like there wasn't any other choice. You know, there was still this little hanging on in the back of my mind that if you're Catholic, you're definitely going to heaven. Not like, you know, so many of the other people that have other faiths. So it was just normal. It was a normal thing. You know, at first, we lived within very close walking distance to a public school and he spent kindergarten, first and second grade in a public school, but then I transferred him to a Catholic school

> and so he went through elementary school and high school in a Catholic school. So, yeah, I would say we were automatic Catholic. It was like there wasn't anything else.

Cara is no longer Catholic. She said, "I don't feel bad about not being a Catholic anymore. In fact, it makes me very happy not to be a Catholic anymore. I call myself a recovering Catholic. See, the idea is recovery, you know."

James

Cara had James after a very difficult birth:

> And I was thrilled that we both survived it. And I had this beautiful baby. And I just thought I was lucky. And so he was precious to me, totally and completely precious. But I knew right away something was different, but I was just thrilled that I had him. Like I said, he was precious, you know, and he grew up being precious. He was the most fun baby, the most fun toddler, all of his learning. I adored being with him and I had a grand time. Everybody else, you know, thought something's wrong and I thought, yeah, but, you know, look at, he's so intelligent. Look at what he can do.

Further, she added, "I've always been grateful, happy, honored, not only to be his mother, but that I have him."

James was diagnosed with a special needs condition during his childhood. His father left the family as "you know, he didn't like the idea of having a child that was a little different." Cara then supported herself and her son as a single mother who both worked and went to college and graduate school. While James was in high school, a priest at the school took him under his wing and also offered support and guidance to Cara, as she described:

> I went to the high school and I told the principal at our interview that my son needed, you know, special education. And they said he didn't have any, you know, it was a Catholic school, but he said, but we have a counselor here and he works with all of the students that have special needs or any special problems. And I was just so grateful and happy, you know, because I thought, wow, I mean, I was all alone. I was a single mom… So I was really grateful for the counselor in our lives. Little did I know that what he was doing is testing us out for vulnerability, for abuse.

This priest sexually abused James throughout his high school years.

The Disclosure

James did not disclose his abuse until he was in his late 20s. Cara described that moment as, "it was like the air was pushed out of me. Like I couldn't breathe and I had to consciously breathe." The disclosure came about when:

> My friend, … she read an article in the newspaper…about the sex abuse in [another city] and she folded it up and sent me the newspaper article and she said, 'I know that James had a close relationship with his counselor. Read this. Do you think it happened to James?' And it took me days, even maybe two or three weeks, to even think about realistically asking James about it because I kept thinking, 'oh no, that can't be.' He [the priest counselor] was a friend. He helped me. He was my partner in getting through life as a single mom…So I finally, I talked it over with my husband [husband after James's father], and he said 'not knowing is worse than knowing' and I thought okay so I did and, um, at first James said 'no it didn't happen' that he had heard about other people but it didn't happen to him and so I was relieved but not completely relieved. There was

> something in the back of my mind that was a question mark floating around in my head. So that's why I kept thinking about, 'he isn't going to tell me if it happened. How do I find out for sure?' Because by that time, I needed to know for sure and so I told him about my abuse when I was younger, and how I felt it was my fault and felt horribly ashamed and then over the years realized it wasn't my fault. It was that the abuser was nothing but a good for nothing pig and all of a sudden he opened up and he said, 'it did happen to me' and, you know, it was, there was this feeling of, I knew that question, that question mark floating in my head, it was erased. I felt, okay, I did the right thing. I made him comfortable enough to say it. But part of me died."

Cara continued by saying:

> It was being hit by a ton of bricks. And I just, and it was surreal. There was this element of being surreal that he said it, I could imagine it. But my mind kept saying it can't be true. Not with what friendship that, you know, and how he [the priest] said he was helping us. It was a moment of dual feelings, you know. But you know what was interesting? Is I could tell on James' face that he was happy it came out…you know how when people are upset and you can see the tightness of their skin and their faces? All of a sudden, that was easy. And I thought, 'okay, I'm a wreck right now, but he's a little bit calmer.' It was out and so that's how it happened.

After the Disclosure

Since James disclosed his abuse, he has slowly told more and more of his story over the years. Cara has tried to process what happened:

And there was that trying to understand why and it was difficult to share feelings with my son because [people with special needs] don't do that very easily. It takes a long time, so it ends up being a major process. But for me, it was, why did he do it? The first thing was not, this is interesting, that's the level of belief that, priests were there to help it was what did I do wrong what did you what did I as a mother do wrong to let this happen and then then that after that after I processed that for a while feeling bad and wanting to protect my son and and And trying to get information out of him, which was impossible at the time. He wouldn't talk about it. He did, however, instead of talking about it, he showed me what had happened that first time. Because I thought, how did it start? And he told me that he would bring alcohol, you know, and have him drink whiskey and beer, and then show him, like, Playboy magazines, you know, that kind of thing…And then how he pulled my son's clothes off. And he did all of that without saying a word. You know, he just, he showed me. I mean, he didn't pull his clothes off, but he was, he, you know, went like this [she made a hand gesture], you know. So you knew what. Yeah, I knew what he was doing. And that's how I discovered it. And I was horrified. And there was that sense of, how did you do this to this innocent child? And then later it was that sense of betrayal of how could you say you were our friend? How could you say you were my friend? How could you say you were helping him and doing this? Disbelief. And that feeling has just intensified as the years have gone by. Because little by little, I learn more from my son. It doesn't come out all at once. It takes time. Like I said, it's a process.

Telling Her Story

I asked Cara directly why she was participating in my research and she said:

> I feel very strongly about sharing our stories. I think that when we share our story, we help other people that are going through the same thing for a couple of reasons. One, it's a sense of not being alone, that there's somebody out there that understands understands what you feel, what you are going through, you know, just a variety of emotions, anger, a sense of helplessness, you know, that kind of thing. But also, I've always found that when somebody shares a story with me that's kind of similar, it's in a way a guide for me.

Pseudonyms

Cara chose the names, Cara and James, for herself and her son for personal reasons. I cannot help but notice that the name "Cara" is close to the word "care." Given the facts of Cara's life story, such as an absence of adequate care in her childhood, the way she created imaginary internal objects to care for her as a child, the way she embraced the offer of care from the priest who eventually abused James, her fierce caregiving of James and the meaning she has made of her life through caring for others, the name she chose for herself for this research is quietly and perhaps unconsciously perfect. Cara was the second participant to chose the name "James" for her son. I can only imagine that the derivative meaning of this name, "may God protect" (Campbell, n.d.-a), is also Cara's wish for her son, particularly now that she is in her 80s.

My Experience of Cara

There is something about Cara's energy that is difficult for me to put into words. I could viscerally feel her enthusiasm and gratitude towards me for taking on this subject even in the email exchange we had before we spoke. I had a certainty that she would follow through. She was a bit late for the first interview as she had some trouble signing the research release virtually. However, I had no doubt she would show up, and when she appeared on my screen, we both

cheered. I experienced her energy as contagious and I very much looked forward to interviewing her a second time. During our video conversations, I found myself with the fantasy of wishing that she was my mother.

Categories of Meaning

By the analysis of Cara's transcripts, five categories of meaning were elucidated. These five categories of meaning described how Cara's coping mechanisms have evolved over time and since James' disclosure, how Cara went from not-knowing to understanding the institutional structure that allowed for James' abuse, how the repetition of the words "horror' and "eraser" described the unconscious work that Cara has done with experiences that she cannot fully articulate, the collapse of Cara's holding environment and how she rebuilt it, and the transformation of the meaning of motherhood for Cara. I allowed Cara's own words to title each category of meaning.

> **"And so I created a magic coat and it was a coat that every night I put on and it was magic because inside of it, it had everything I ever needed to live."**

Winnicott (1960) described the holding environment as the relational and psychological milieu that a good enough caregiver provides for a child. This environment provides the safety, security, consistency, and attunement that allows the child to develop a healthy and genuine sense of self. Within this holding environment, the child can simply exist, grow, and go-on-being without the threat of severe impingement disrupting their development. Winnicott also described the transitional object (1953), as something like a blanket or a stuffed animal, that the child uses to soothe themself in the caregiver's absence. Together, the holding environment and the

transitional object psychologically hold the child and teach them that they can hold themselves when external holding is unavailable. This category of meaning describes the transformation in Cara's coping within the various faulty holding environments that she has inhabited.

The holding environment of Cara's childhood was not good enough. Her mother, for various reasons, could not be a good-enough mother (Winnicott, 1953). In response, Cara adapted by creating an imaginary transitional object to soothe herself within her lacking holding environment. She said:

> I had a magic coat and I would go to sleep, you know, I would lay in bed and I'd be upset, you know, thinking about things that happened and just wanting to feel loved and wasn't and so I created a magic coat. And it was a coat that every night I put on. And it was magic because inside of it, it had everything I ever needed to live. And I would go on adventures, travel the world with my magic coat. And I never wanted for anything because it was right there in the coat. And that's the way I would fall asleep every night.

Cara's magic coat is a transitional object in the fullest sense as it is what Cara used to soothe herself in the absence of a good enough caregiver. It was entirely her own creation, she summoned it nightly from her imagination, and it contained everything she needed. She provided for herself what her caregiving environment could not provide for her.

St. James functioned alongside the magic coat as a holding presence that existed within her faith. Cara described her relationship to St. James with a warmth that indicates that he was a felt and living presence for her that also provided selfobject functioning (Kohut, 1971). She said:

> St. James was my pal. My mom did have some emotional issues, and so I was physically abused and there was nowhere to go for any help back then. I got my solace and my sense

> of being loved and cared for and protected through my relationship with St. James. It was, everything is going to be okay. Even if this happened, I can go and I can sit down and talk to St. James and everything is going to be okay.

St. James did what her mother could not. He was reliably present, reliably loving, and reliably protective. Cara's attachment to him was so strong that she named her son James, not after his own father of the same name, but after the saint. She explained, "I'm naming him after St. James…That was my level of faith. I was protected. Everything was going to be fine. No matter what horrors came into my life, everything was fine because I had somebody walking with me."

The magic coat and St. James were coping tools that Cara built in childhood. They were based on magical thinking, but they carried her through a childhood that contained physical abuse and the trauma she experienced when she witnessed a tragic fire:

> And so after I walked a little bit down the block more, there were children lying on the sidewalks, all blackened with the smoke, you know, vomiting. They were all alive. They were alive, but they were laying there vomiting and sick and couldn't move, you know, until somebody could come and help them. And then my father found me and he said, '[your sibling's] in the hospital'. And I went to the hospital. And the first thing I saw was a stack halfway up the wall of the hospital waiting room, stacked of dead bodies right there with one of the priests that we liked blessing each body. I didn't know they were bodies because they were all burnt.

Despite the horrors Cara witnessed and despite the sophisticated means that she developed to cope with these traumas, the magic coat and St. James were not enough to cope

with the betrayal of the priest who she was initially so grateful to have as a presence in her and James's lives:

> And I was just so grateful and happy, you know, because…I was all alone. I was a single mom. So I was really grateful for the [priest] in our lives. Little did I know that what he was doing is testing us out for vulnerability, for abuse.

Thus, in the years after James's disclosure, Cara's means of coping underwent a transformation that may be described as a movement from the magical and omnipotent toward the grounded and human. As a professional, she developed what she described as a deliberate practice of compartmentalization after dealing with difficult human challenges at work:

> At the end of the day, I would open my file cabinet and I'd pull out everything like this [she gestured] from my head, from my heart, and put it in the drawer, close the drawer and lock it, and say, 'you're staying there until tomorrow when I come back in the office.'

Unlike the magic coat and St. James, the file cabinet was concrete, but it performed the same function in that it created a space in which the unbearable could be contained so that ordinary life could continue.

However, when it came to knowing about James's abuse, the file cabinet was not enough and had its limits, especially in the middle of the night. Cara described her difficulty in containing her thoughts and feelings around James's abuse:

> I don't know if I will ever completely manage it to the extent that I'm okay with it, that's never going to happen. I don't know if there will ever be a time that sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night without the vision of him being raped and how that makes me feel. And it doesn't happen every night, but it happens often enough that it's there.

For this repeated situation, Cara's coping mechanism became even more concrete and contemporary as well:

> I know I have my iPad under my pillow. And I turn it on. And in the middle of the night when I can't stop the thoughts or the visions, I've got my favorite little games on my iPad. And that breaks the thought, you know, the chain of thoughts. And then I can go back to sleep.

The literal, physical iPad under the pillow is on the other end of the spectrum from the magic coat. The iPad is not magical or omnipotent or a symbol, but it breaks the litany of unbearable images and returns her to sleep. The child who once traveled the world inside a magic coat is now an adult who plays games on a screen until her bad memories fade.

The most significant aspect of Cara's coping transformation is her movement from solitary and self-constructed containment toward the human and relational. She described how she has built her present life:

> I have been able to surround myself with very caring, loving people. And so I do have some close friends, associates. And a lot of them, interestingly enough, have had hardships in their lives and are very caring people. And so I do surround myself. And the older I get, I eliminate people that I don't think I can trust, that I don't like.

Her survivors' groups have been central to this, as she described, "I started going to these groups and realized that I was groomed." The groups gave her not only psycho-education, but the experience of being held by people who know what she carries. This circle of chosen and trustworthy people, who have had an experience similar to hers, and who she has gathered around herself, is the mature and human version of the magic coat she created alone as a child.

Cara's movement toward human connection and her strong capacity for it were palpable to me in the feelings I experienced across our exchanges from our first emailed contact. Even in this preliminary email exchange, I felt her enthusiasm and her certainty about wanting to participate. When she appeared on my screen for the first interview, she was late because of the technical difficulty with the research release, but we both smiled and cheered. The cheering was a small moment, but it was evidence of the capacity for strong human connection that Cara has constructed, even across several emails and a video screen.

Kohut (1971) described selfobjects as people, objects, or experiences that provide the necessary functions that one needs in order to develop and maintain a cohesive and stable sense of self. The three selfobject functions Kohut identified are; mirroring, which is the felt sense of being seen and affirmed; idealizing, which is the felt sense of being held and protected by something larger and stronger than oneself; and twinship, which is the felt sense of not being alone, of belonging to a community of people who share one's fundamental experience of the world.

Throughout Cara's life, she has come up with adaptive ways to provide needed selfobject functioning for herself in the absence of caregivers who could reliably provide these functions for her. The magic coat and St. James provided mirroring and idealizing selfobject functioning for a child who was not being adequately mirrored or held by the adults around her. Perhaps St. James provided a sense of twinship in some way, but this twinship selfobject functioning, for the most part, remained inadequate. Thus, it is significant that now Cara has found a circle of chosen and trusted people, her survivors' groups in particular, that fully provide the twinship selfobject functioning that her earlier coping mechanisms could not supply.

“I felt for years, why didn’t I know? How did this happen?”

Bollas (1987) conceptualized the unthought known as known thought or experience that is held unconsciously because it is too painful to be made conscious, symbolized, or spoken. It is something that is carried in the body or in behavior or in the structure of one’s thoughts and choices, but it has not yet been made thinkable or available for conscious reflection. The unthought known is not repression or something that has been pushed out of awareness. Instead, it is something that has never been brought to a symbolic form or made thinkable to begin with. This category of meaning describes Cara’s trajectory from not-knowing to clearly understanding the institutional structure that caused James’ abuse. For Cara, the unthought known operated across her Catholic formation until James disclosed his abuse. This Catholic formation that taught her that priests are representatives of God and therefore she must accept whatever they told her was the same formation that kept the knowledge of what the priest was doing to her son outside the boundaries of what could be thought or consciously known.

Likewise, Bion (1962) described - K, or minus K, as the active evacuation of meaning, a destruction of the capacity to know, and a defense against painful emotional experience. For Cara, - K was not an active defense that she chose. It was part of the structure of her Catholic upbringing and environment. Cara had been taught since her childhood, through experiences of genuine horror, such as the fire, that a priest is the representative of God and therefore she must accept what he says or how he interprets an event. For example, of the fire she said:

> It was an exceptionally traumatizing event…And everybody was, well, everybody was in the state of shock. And from the pulpit, the only comforting that came was, this is what God wanted. And God wanted these children with him…You know, I think I felt like a bit of chopped liver thinking, 'Well, God didn't want the rest of us,' but that was the extent of the faith.

This teaching did not simply ask her to trust clergy, it organized her entire relationship to knowing and not-knowing around clerical authority. The core of her being was taught to believe that what a priest said was true, what a priest did was acceptable, and what a priest offered was guidance. This structure was so complete that when the priest at James's school positioned himself as her ally, and offered the help she desperately needed for herself and her vulnerable child, there was no available vantage point, at the time, from which she could see what he was actually doing.

Cara described the conditions of her life at the time with a clarity that arrived retrospectively:

> I was a single mom. I was working two jobs. I was in graduate school. I looked for help and my background was the priests are representatives of God and they will help you, and yeah, and I fell right into it.

Then she was introduced to a priest at her son's school who worked specifically with students with special needs. She said, "I was really grateful for the [priest] in our lives. Little did I know that what he was doing is testing us out for vulnerability, for abuse." The gratitude she describes is not naivety, but it is a completely rational response from an exhausted single mother, "For about two years, I didn't have enough money. All we ate was macaroni and cheese. And once in a

while, I was able to get some hot dogs to mix in there. We were in need," whose formation had prepared her to receive this kind of offer of help as a gift from God.

The priest became something more than a school counselor, he was "a friend. He helped me. He was my partner in getting through life as a single mom." The word partner is significant because during her childhood, Cara had used an internal figure, St. James, to walk beside her. This priest seemingly stepped into the role of the protector that she had never had and as a representative of God who was literally walking beside her. The unthought known, that the priest could be something other than a force of goodness, was entirely outside of Cara's conscious awareness and inaccessible.

The unthought known began to rise to consciousness when her friend sent her the article about clergy abuse. However, Cara needed her husband to metabolize the thought and return it to her in a way that made it thinkable to her, she said:

> So I finally, I talked it over with my husband, and he said not knowing is worse than knowing and I thought okay so I did and at first James said, 'no, it didn't happen,' that he had heard about other people, but it didn't happen to him and so I was relieved, but not completely relieved, there was something in the back of my mind that were question marks floating around in my head.

When James actually disclosed his abuse, the unthought known became devastatingly thinkable. Cara's first response was not outrage directed at the priest or the institution. It was self-blame directed entirely at herself. She said, "The first thing was not, this is interesting, that's the level of belief that priests were there to help, it was what did I do wrong, what did I as a mother, do wrong to let this happen." This self-blame was the result of how she was trained to

think. That is, if a priest is the representative of God and therefore trustworthy, and something terrible happened anyway, the failure must be hers. The institutional structure, that had organized her not-knowing, then organized her self-blame when the not-knowing failed.

The movement away from self-blame and toward true understanding came gradually and through her survivors' groups. Cara described this transformation:

> Yes, it was institutional and I've learned all of that, you know, because I felt for years felt so horrendous that why didn't I know? How did this happen? You know, I wanted a perfect loving life for him and then all of this happened and I took it all on my shoulders. And then I started going to these groups and realized that I was groomed. Groomed and I was really angry at myself initially. But then I thought, I was a single mom. I was working two jobs. I was in graduate school. I looked for help and my background was the priests are representatives of God and they will help you.

The realization that she was groomed, through no fault of her own, helped Cara move her blame from herself to the perpetrating priest and to the institution that protected him. Cara did not fail to protect her son. She was targeted because she was the kind of mother that a predatory priest would seek out, as she was alone, struggling and trusting of priests.

Her support groups also gave Cara a structural understanding of the scope of this institutional abuse. She learned that what had happened to James was not the act of one deviant individual, but it was part of a pattern that was pervasive and institutionally protected. She said:

> I heard from other survivors that the priests, before they raped them, told them that God was in the room. So it's like they all learn. You know, it's an MO, so to speak…They have a playbook, yes…And do they learn it in the seminary? I think so.

In using the phrase, “God was in the room,” the priest who abused James was not only exploiting her son’s vulnerability, but he was weaponizing the very formation that had organized Cara’s trust, which is the belief that a priest is a representative of God and, therefore, one accepts whatever he says or does.

Cara’s understanding expanded further as she continued to educate herself. Her thinking moved from one bad man to a systemic institutional rot that she described perfectly:

> My thing is if there’s one bad apple in the box, it affects every apple. It rots all the apples and so today my feeling is every religion on the face of the earth is rotten. That’s my stance right now, and that’s why I can’t be a part of religion. It’s like, I don’t want to rot myself.

Cara’s movement from self-blame to structural clarity to the refusal to be contaminated by the institution is the arc of this category of meaning. Cara began by asking what she did wrong and she ended with the understanding that the institution itself is rotten and that her own integrity required her to stand outside it.

Bollas (1987) conceptualized the unthought known as possibly something that waits, sometimes across a lifetime, to be made thinkable. For Cara, what she had not been able to know was made thinkable and knowable by James’s disclosure, conversations with her husband, and the holding environment provided by her survivors’ groups, which provided the language and the framework that her childhood Catholic formation had not supplied. This retroactive reconstruction of what happened is not a simple narrative of moving from ignorance to knowledge. It is indicative of the psychological work Cara did to dismantle a childhood

formation that organized her relationship to trust, authority, and the sacred and to replace it with a clear and accurate understanding of what was done to her and to her son.

"You can't erase it. It scars over, but there's still a scar."

When listening with a psychoanalytic stance, the repetition of a specific word is significant. When a person uses the same word over and over, seemingly without awareness that they are doing so, the psychoanalyst understands this repetition as a signal that the word is doing a type of unconscious psychological work for something that cannot be fully articulated. During her interviews, Cara returned to two words, "horror" and "eraser", with a repetitive frequency. She returned, again and again, to these words that seem to describe her experiences and her attempts to manage them. This category of meaning traces her use of "horror" and "eraser" and attempts to make sense of them.

Freud (1914/1958) described the repetition compulsion as an unconscious pull to repeat out of an unresolved need to master something traumatic or painful that is not yet mastered. The repetition compulsion arises out of a desire to achieve closure or a better outcome. For Cara, the repetition of the word "horror" is not only a verbal occurrence. It is the linguistic symbol of experiences that she has not yet fully processed or resolved, but hopes to master.

Winnicott (1974) described the "fear of breakdown" as the dread of something that has already happened but that has not yet been experienced, something that is held outside awareness because the conscious could not bear to know it when it occurred. For Cara, horror is not only a description of James's abuse. It is the word that was waiting to name what she has known unconsciously, but has not always been able to fully feel.

Cara's relationship to horror did not begin with James's disclosure. It began in her childhood, in a family and community that was immersed in Catholicism such that it was the only framework she had for managing trauma. This belief system also provided the eraser to be used for handling psychological pain. Cara said:

> So there was a deep level of Catholicism there, that was attached to my faith in that no matter what happened, even a horrible, horrible experience, there was God that was going to take care of you. You know it was like, well, I didn't die in the fire and [my sibling] who was burned in the fire and in the hospital for an extended period of time but was alive you know that was like, ah thank God, you know, um, kind of trying to erase the horror and accept the loving aspect.

For the children who actually perished, the eraser was what was said from the pulpit, "And it was, you know, and one of the things that were spoken through, you know, at the pulpit was, 'God chose these children to be with him'." This metaphoric eraser worked, "No matter what horrors came into my life, everything was fine…"

Cara used the eraser in her professional life also. She described her first job and revealed how deeply she had internalized the eraser, "I remember my first job, and in my mind I had a giant eraser, and I was going to help [the people I worked with] and I was going to erase problems. Well, that was naive." The giant eraser of her professional life is an iteration of the eraser the Church used. The aim in each case is identical in that the eraser took away what is painful, and it managed horror.

When James disclosed his abuse, the horror for Cara, was beyond what could be erased. Cara described the moment James showed her, without words, what had been done to him, by miming his clothes being taken off:

> And I was horrified. And there was that sense of, how did you do this to this innocent child? And then later it was that sense of betrayal of how could you say you were our friend? How could you say you were my friend? How could you say you were helping him and doing this? Disbelief. And that feeling has just intensified as the years have gone by.

The horror is too great to be erased and, thus, it accumulates as James adds new information to it. The eraser that she has known since her own childhood is not enough for this horror. Cara said this simply, “As a mother, I couldn’t erase it.”

Cara used the word “horrified” to describe how she learned about the scope of childhood abuse in general, she said, “When I find out that children have been abused, especially sexual abuse, like it’s in the papers all the time now with the pedophilia going on, I’m literally horrified, horrified." The repetition of the word “horrified” along with the word “literally,” suggests that the scope of what she’s learned is too great to describe in one word. In response to this, I said:

> It strikes me that you just said that, you know, when you hear about some of this, you’re horrified. Because for you, the bar is so high. What horrifies you, what you’ve been through your whole life, for you to be horrified really speaks to how horrifying it all really is.

Cara received this statement and confirmed it, “It is. Especially, I know all these decades of suffering my son has gone through.” The bar for horror is high for Cara because she has been

living with horror her whole life. She is not horrified because she is fragile, she is horrified because the reality and insidiousness of systemic clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse is so genuinely and deeply horrifying. She repeats the words “horror” and “horrifying” over and over in an attempt to master it.

Cara also invoked the eraser when she responded to James after he disclosed his abuse. She said:

> So it was really important for James to know I didn’t think any less of him, that it wasn’t his fault, there was no need for him to be ashamed. I felt that maybe because that’s the way I felt when I was younger. And I wanted, there goes my eraser again, I wanted to try to erase some of that from him so that at least he knew I didn’t feel that way about it, about him.

Cara speaks of the eraser here in a very self-aware and realistic manner. She knows she cannot erase or deny the horror here, but that perhaps she can use the eraser to spare James the shame she felt herself as a child who was abused.

Her self-awareness about the eraser and its limitations continued to evolve. She ultimately said, “I realized there’s no erasing. You can’t erase it. It scars over, but there’s still a scar.” She then said:

> You know how, have you ever had a scar, and if you touch it really deeply, you can feel a little tenderness underneath? Yeah? That’s it. That’s it. The scar isn’t like, well, now you’re okay. There’s no pain. There is. And so I look at the world now and I don’t have an eraser and I would love to have an eraser.

Cara no longer has the eraser to dispel horror from consciousness. She has handled the raw horror by allowing it to scar over into a more manageable form. It feels like, for Cara, the scar with its deep tenderness is the most accurate way she can describe being a mother who was raised Catholic, who experienced multiple traumas, and whose child was ultimately abused by a priest.

Toward the end of our last conversation, Cara summed up her new understanding of the eraser perfectly, in the following exchange between Cara and myself (EBS):

> EBS: What gives your life meaning now? And is it any different than what gave your life meaning before you knew what happened to James?
>
> Cara: Now, meaning for my life is helping people. I think that's why I'm here. I think that's why people are here. I mean, so it's not only me. I think this is something important to humanity… You know, I like to help people. That, to me, is important. That's why I'm here.
>
> EBS: Is that different than before?
>
> Cara: Not so much because when I first started my career… I started with a big eraser. I wanted to erase the problems and I learned that that doesn't work. But I also learned how to help people without being depressed that I didn't have a big eraser. So in that respect, it's changed.
>
> EBS: So it's helping them grapple with their challenges, rather than erasing their challenges.
>
> Cara: Exactly, exactly. And to bring it on a small scale. I'm not erasing the problems of the world that's impossible in my capacity right now. If I was, you know, a

> multimillionaire or a billionaire, I might be able to do it. But I can't. But with [the things that I do professionally and as an advocate] …I can help people. I can help people one at a time and that makes me feel satisfied and that's the meaning of my life and I like that.

I cannot help but notice that Cara did not mention "horror" in that exchange. This suggests that she, as Freud would indicate, is mastering the experience of horror and that she needed to put down the eraser in order to do so. The eraser was a tool for the denial of trauma. Cara has processed the horror enough now that she can help others learn to bear it. Freud's concept of sublimation (1930/1961), or the use of something traumatic or painful in a way that is positive or helpful to others, has replaced the repetition compulsion. Cara makes meaning by caring for and helping others.

"I've got a hole inside of me where all that sense of safety was."

Winnicott's holding environment (1960) is the milieu, that ideally provides the conditions of safety and security and that allows a child to develop in a healthy way. This category of meaning describes the rupture of Cara's Catholic holding environment and the new holding environment that she is constructing to take its place. For the purpose of this category of meaning, it is important to point out that when a holding environment is good enough, its presence is invisible. It is simply the condition of existence, the water the fish swims in, and it is noticed only when it fails. For Cara, Catholicism was a holding environment, even in a literal sense:

> Growing up Catholic was intense as far as not only our belief, you know, internalized everything that the church teachings pounded into our heads. But we lived it. You know, we lived a half a block from the church, right across the alley from the convent. So we

> were immersed in Catholicism, even in our environment, our living environment. So there was really no way to even get around it. It was a part of our belief system, but it was a part of our daily lives.

When this holding environment revealed itself as the structure that had made her son's abuse not only possible, but impossible to foresee, its collapse was not simply a loss of faith. It was the loss of the surround that had formed and held her for her entire existence. Cara described this immersion further, "You know, it was intense. There really wasn't much of my life that didn't include Catholicism in one way or another." She described being so thoroughly held by Catholicism that she had no point-of-view from anywhere but inside of it.

Within this immersive holding environment, the sense of safety that Cara described was of being protected by something infinite and reliable, something that could absorb horror, metabolize it, and return it as God's will. As previously described, this sense of safety was tested repeatedly by the horrors that Cara experienced, but each time, up until James's disclosure, "I was protected. Everything was going to be fine. No matter what horrors came into my life, everything was fine because I had somebody walking with me."

James's disclosure of his abuse ruptured this holding environment to its core. The priest, the representative of God, who had positioned himself as Cara's partner in caring for James, turned out to be the source of the most horrific horror. The structure that she felt was holding and protecting her and James, was actually the structure that had made his abuse possible and protected the man who perpetrated it. Winnicott (1974) described the fear of breakdown as the dread of a catastrophe that has already happened but has not yet been fully experienced. For Cara, the collapse of the holding environment was exactly this catastrophe that had been

happening throughout James's high school years. It was invisible from inside of her Catholic immersion and it could not be seen until James disclosed it. Cara described the collapse of her holding environment perfectly, "I've got a hole inside of me where all that sense of safety was."

After the Catholic holding environment collapsed, Cara looked for a replacement, "I tried on different religions, and they didn't work because I found too much of a similarity to Catholicism, which I was horrified by, you know, because there is a lot of abuse in all these other religions." She tried to look for another religious holding environment, but other organized religions had an institutional structure that was too close to Catholicism:

> I do not like being attached to a religion that, to me, is not only confining but frightening, because in my mind they demand certain things of you and if you don't want to give it, you're not really accepted, and it's like, do I need this in my life? No, bye.

Instead, she decided to retain the spiritual without the institution at all. She described the feeling she had while in the presence of Native Americans singing a song to the wind, "And it was a really hot, sunny day. And while they were singing, all of a sudden the wind came up. And, you know, it was just this, oh, yeah, that works." She added:

> Have I found a religion that I am going to practice? No. Do I have a deep sense of spirituality? Yes. And maybe I take a little bit of this, that, and the other to make it work for me. It's what makes me feel comfortable.

This new holding environment that she is constructing is flexible, self-made, and without the constraints of an institution. It holds her without confining her even though she said, "I have to admit I would love to say I'm an atheist and just forget about the whole thing, but I have a question mark. I am a question mark. And to be honest, I'm okay with that."

Winnicott (1958) described the capacity to be alone as a developmental achievement, when one is able to feel held and secure in the absence of external holding. It is built through the internalization of the idea that the self can sustain itself on its own. Cara has achieved this capacity via the traumatic loss of her inherited Catholic holding environment and her gradual construction of something that is more flexible, genuine and personal. This is how she is filling the hole where her sense of safety once lived.

"I didn't protect him and other than somebody actually murdering him, I couldn't think of anything worse."

Winnicott (1963) described going-on-being as the continuity of being alive, productive, and creative, while moving forward in time and despite our life experiences. For Cara, the identity of being a mother was so central to the core of who she was, that James's disclosure threatened the continuity of her self. This category of meaning traces the arc of the meaning of motherhood to Cara, from before James's disclosure, which ruptured her sense of who she was as a mother, to the present as she repairs that internal rupture.

Cara's experience of being James's mother began before he was born. She described her pregnancy in a way that shows how much she had taken on a maternal identity from the beginning:

> And I remember when I was pregnant and I would touch my belly and I knew he was right under my heart. And I liked him there. And just maybe about a month, maybe two months before he was born, I kind of, this might sound crazy, but I felt a little bit of a sadness. I mean, a wonderful feeling about having him in my arms, but I felt a little sadness that he was no longer going to be tucked away under my heart.

The sadness she described is not ambivalence about motherhood. It is about anticipating a separation from him, from her literally body holding his body. He was, from before his birth, located under her heart. That is where he has always lived in her internal world, regardless of what the years have brought.

James's birth was difficult and posed a danger to both of them. Cara described it:

> I was literally dying. They thought I was dying. They no longer got a heartbeat, you know, while I was, um, delivering him, you know, they they thought he had died too. So it was an extremely difficult birth. And I was thrilled that we both survived it. And I had this beautiful baby. And I just thought I was lucky.

Afterward, there was a maternal devotion to him:

> He was precious to me, totally and completely precious. But I knew right away something was different, but I was just thrilled that I had him. Like I said, he was precious, you know, and he grew up being precious. He was the most fun baby, the most fun toddler, all of his learning. I adored being with him and I had a grand time.

The word precious appears four times in this passage. It carries the full weight of a mother who nearly lost her child at birth, who was told something was wrong with him, and who chose, despite this, to see him as a gift. Her maternal identity was organized from the beginning around protecting and cherishing him regardless of how he was seen in anyone else's eyes.

When James's father left because, "You know, he didn't like the idea of having a child that was a little different," Cara became a single parent, yet, "Everything for me with my son was fun and wonderful…I wanted to make sure he felt loved, that nothing in the world was going to make him feel that he wasn't loved. That was in my mind."

Cara was also James's protector, and this was a core aspect of her maternal identity, "As a mother, somebody, a caregiver, somebody who loves and care gives out of love. That's always been my feeling of mother. A protector." Then, with the simplicity of someone naming a wound precisely, "once I found out [about his abuse], that sense of being a protector of my child was very damaged." Cara was not saying that her relationship with James was damaged, she was saying that her identity as his mother was damaged.

Cara has had to reckon internally with the idea that what she had not been able to protect him from was unavoidable. She said, "I didn't protect him. And other than somebody actually murdering him, I couldn't think of anything worse." Although there was no true resolution to the harm done to James, there has been a parallel process as Cara described, "Every aspect of his life has a problem connected to it. And that, so basically is just about every aspect of my life has a problem connected to it." Cara's internal identity as James's mother has morphed from being a protector who shields him from all harm, to a protector who knows she cannot keep all harm at bay, but that she can walk the most difficult experiences of his life alongside him and provide him with what he needs. She is his living embodied magic coat and St. James wrapped up in "one little old person" who is certainly an oldie and a goodie.

For my part, I noticed during our video conversations that I had the fantasy of wishing Cara was my mother. Although Cara felt that she failed, in some ways, as a mother because she did not protect James, in my countertransference, I felt that Cara is exactly the kind of protective and loving mother that anyone might wish for. I even said to her, "You were the perfect mom for him." She answered, "I never saw it that way. Thank you. I saw that he was the perfect child for me."

Freud (1917) described mourning as the slow process of withdrawing psychic energy from a lost object or ideal and gradually reinvesting it in the world. For Cara, the mourning required by James's disclosure was not the mourning of James himself, who is still alive and still her son. It was the mourning of her idea of being a mother who could protect him from anything. That version of herself as a mother had to be grieved in order for a new maternal identity to take its place, one that can protect him from some things, but not all things, and who can help him mange what she cannot protect him from.

Conclusion

These five categories of meaning encapsulate Cara's lived experiences. The categories of meaning also express how Cara is making meaning of the experience of James's abuse and disclosure, or how she is incorporating it into her life and moving forward. To do so, she has rebuilt her collapsed holding environment, moved from not-knowing to understanding, experienced a transformation in both coping and maternal identity, and processed the horrors she has endured with a new understanding that they cannot possibly be erased.

I will end this case with Cara's words, which were spoken to me directly at the beginning of our second interview and in reference to our conversation the week before. It sums up the depth of her loss, as a former practicing Catholic in the face of the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse that her son endured. She said:

> As a matter of fact this past week… we went to a [local]…event… and one of the things they have is a big parade on Saturday and it's a yearly event. They've been doing it for decades. They had a St. James altar. And I think it was because, you know, we had been talking last week and I'd been thinking about St. James and everything. I walked into the

room where the altar was and I broke out into tears. I just started crying. I just, because it was beautiful, it was set up very beautifully, and a lot of prayer cards, you know, asking for prayers and everything. And I just started crying, thinking that all that comfort that I used to feel is not there. It was just mostly question marks, you know. And so, and I thought of you, you know, because I thought, oh, yes, talking about this, you know, just made it very sensitive to see something beautiful that I was always involved in. And, you know, in that. And I just, I cried for them, the sadness of it…it was that loss, that feeling of safety and contentment that you have when you really believe. And it's not there anymore, and you don't know who to reach out to and where to reach out for that same feeling. and you realize it probably will never return because there's a sense when you're growing up, when you're younger, and you're very involved in it, that it's the ultimate sense of safety to be in the arms of God… You know? And how do you get that back? Well, you don't really….Not to that level. Not in that same way, you know…When we're younger, we believe in it so unquestioning, you know, that it's just there, and it will be there, and it will take care of you no matter what. You know, I don't know. It was just that little bit of, ooh, that's all gone.

Case Four: Maria

General Information

Maria is white, married and in her 50s. She is the mother of adult children, and she has grandchildren. She has lived in the south her entire life and presently lives in a rural area. Maria attended college for several years. She worked outside of the home until she decided to stay home with her growing family. Later, she become very active in her children's academic

education. She also took charge of their Catholic formation up until the time of her son, Gabriel's disclosure that he had been sexually abused by a priest.

Maria was born and raised Catholic in a predominately Catholic community. However, it was in adulthood that she became more serious about her faith and began to study and practice it more actively. Since the family learned of Gabriel's abuse, they have left the Catholic Church for a Protestant denomination. Maria is active in advocating for those affected by the clergy abuse crisis. Even though some of her children have now launched from the family home, they all remain very close and supportive of each other.

Being Catholic

About growing up Catholic, Maria said:

> Growing up, I didn't know there was such thing as not being Catholic, but at the same time, my parents did not go to Mass. For me, that was normal, because I don't know that all of my friends went, so I can't say that my friends were devout Catholics either. But everybody was Catholic. I went to Catholic school. It doesn't mean I went to Mass every Sunday, which I didn't. My grandmother was very devout, and my grandmother went to Sunday Mass.

Although Maria experienced her childhood as not that devoutly Catholic, she shared this childhood memory:

> A priest who was in the church at the time…he would come over all the time and he would come over to drink [a specific type of] beer and so my dad always had [a specific type of] beer in the refrigerator for when Father came over to drink… beer at our house.

> That was like the only interaction I really had with the priest was when he would come home and drink … a type of beer at my house which my dad didn't even drink.

She followed with more memories:

> Every now and then I would read at church and go to church with my grandmother and then there was like church bingos or whatever. I don't even know for sure if it was church or if it was just the very small community that I grew up in. I think, you know, sometimes the church and the community, they're kind of intertwined because everybody belonged to both. You know, you could belong to the community but you weren't necessarily Catholic or you were or whatever. So we grew up on farmland out there. My mom's mother was Catholic, but her father was not Catholic and so my mom never went to church, but of course, my grandmother made her make her sacraments, but never went to church with her. She never went to church.

At some point, Maria's mother moved her and her siblings from the public school system to Catholic schools, "I would love to say it was because she really wanted us to have that strong faith background, but I think it was just to take us away from the public school system." About the Catholic schools, she said, "I didn't grow up knowing anything about my faith other than I was Catholic. I can't say I learned a whole bunch about being Catholic in the schools I went to."

Maria summed up her experience of growing up Catholic with:

> The Catholicism that I grew up with was basically so very watered down. You just basically said you were Catholic and that was everything that you were supposed to do. You didn't have to do anything else. You just had to say you were Catholic…We made

> our sacraments, but that was because you just had to do that. You followed that path in Catholic school.

However, she added that, even before Gabriel's abuse became known to the family:

> My mom will absolutely tell you all the things she hates about the Catholic Church and she hates all the priests and blah, blah, blah. But if you say anything about a Catholic, she'll defend the Catholic Church as if she is a devout Catholic and you're about to ruin her life.

Both Maria and her husband became more and more active in the Church as they raised their children, as she described, "We started going to church more and more. Then I got asked to teach…catechism. And I was like, oh, okay. You know, I thought I knew something about being Catholic, but I realized I didn't know much."

Gabriel

Maria described Gabriel, "He is one of my most compassionate children, a deep thinker, [quiet], but a very deep thinker, so I know that he thinks a lot more and things are going on more in him than he speaks about." Further, she said:

> Do I treat him differently in some respects? I guess, yes, but I need him to be strong for himself to know that he can get through this so that he doesn't think that he is not capable or that this has totally destroyed his life because he is getting the help that most people didn't…and he has all his siblings and yeah so he has very big support systems.

Gabriel is now a young adult, a grown man. He has had struggles with symptoms of PTSD. Maria said, "We see him go through his different struggles. I'm easy on him, I'm not too hard on him. But, I don't want to baby him to the point where I just totally cripple him."

The Disclosure

Maria, her husband, and one of the older children in the family had a sense that something was going on with Gabriel when he was in his mid to late teens. One night, Gabriel and this sibling were hanging out together and Gabriel had been drinking. Maria said that the sibling said, "'Gabriel, I know something's wrong. Mom and dad know something's wrong… something's not right. You need to tell me what's going on' and he's like, 'nothing's wrong'," but his sibling kept pushing until Gabriel told him that a priest, who was close to the family, had abused him. They then told their father, who told Maria. She said her husband walked into the bedroom:

> And I guess he woke me up because he was sobbing and I'm like 'what is wrong?' like I couldn't even imagine, could have never guessed…It took forever he was sobbing and sobbing and he couldn't, he was just sitting on the edge of the bed and so then he started telling me what the [kids] told him and then I just remember, I think I don't know it felt like forever, we just sat there and we both just cried…I don't even know what we thought.

Later, Maria spoke to Gabriel herself:

> So, I gave it a little bit of time to sort of pull myself together…and I said, 'I need to go to him' and so I pulled myself together and then I went to talk to him. I told him I loved him. And then I told him about my story of abuse as a child. I had never told my kids any of that. And I felt like that was the time to share with him that I too had been abused. And that I had revealed it to my parents when I was [in my late teens] and I had had counseling and it was much better after going through the whole process of counseling

> after telling and getting it out and so we hugged and we talked and we both cried, because then he wanted to cry for me and I was like, 'No don't cry for me now' but I guess, um, he knew and I know he knew that no matter what, his mom and dad loved him there was no doubt and everything was gonna just work out, none of us knew how.

Reflecting on that time, Maria said, "I guess it's the sadness, the sadness of the whole situation… I guess it's the sadness, the betrayal. It's like there's anger, but it's like there's almost just more sadness than anger."

After the Disclosure

Since Gabriel's disclosure, Maria and her family's lives have changed in may ways. The family has been ostracized from their Catholic community. They have found a new denomination in which to worship. The family has also embraced advocacy for other victims of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, both in terms of mental health supports and legal resources.

Telling Her Story

> I asked Maria to tell me why she was willing to be a participant in this study. She replied: Well, I thought it was interesting that you found me, number one. I don't take it lightly that somebody finds me and then wants to ask me questions, especially if it's to help someone else. And number two, your whole research was, or the reason why you are doing this research was the whole reason why I [do my advocacy work]. So I feel like it's just the hand of God, in my opinion, that is in all of this. Yeah, I mean, I still have a strong faith. So I would say it's the hand of God that is, you know, directing this and directing me or putting me and you together because like, what are the odds? So, yeah, somebody else who doesn't believe would say whatever. But for me, it's a faith thing.

She then said, “Well, I hope it actually gets so far out there and is so helpful that somebody would say, ‘Hey, is that you?’ Because I hope somebody’s looking for it.”

Pseudonyms

Maria asked me to choose pseudonyms for her son and herself, saying “I’m terrible at this…I don’t care what you make up because it doesn’t matter to me, to be honest…In fact, I’ll probably enjoy seeing what you come up with.” Thus, I chose “Maria” in honor of her strong identity as a mother and her unwavering devotion to her children. For her son, I chose a name that means strength, Gabriel, for his strength in enduring the abuse he suffered and for the strength he will continue to need as he heals.

My Experience of Maria

Maria was quite open and willing to speak to me, on one hand, but I also sensed a bit of reserve, or fatigue. I felt a need to have her feel connected to me, or perhaps to trust me, which played out as I unnecessarily mentioned several times that I grew up in the South as she did. I also had the sense that she was quite protective of Gabriel, and I felt that I really did not get to know him through her words. Maria’s faith intimidated me. Our exchange about picking pseudonyms was also interesting. I had the fantasy that she was just too exhausted by what has happened to spend any bandwidth on such a task. I also had the fantasy that perhaps she was telling me she trusted me when she asked me to pick out the names for herself and her son. I also noticed, as I wrote, that I was very actively choosing to leave some of the details about her experience out of this narrative, in an attempt to further mask her identity.

Categories of Meaning

Four categories of meaning arose from my interviews with Maria. These four categories of meaning reflect the transformation of Maria's relationship to her faith, the reconstruction of her thinking about the Church and danger, the collapse of her Catholic community and its replacement, and the transformation of Maria's sense of compassion. To keep each category of meaning grounded in Maria's lived experience, I title each category with her own words.

"You're led to believe your faith is what you know, you're following your faith and you're good to go, you're checking all the right boxes and doing all the right things."

During our conversations, Maria repeatedly used the phrase "checking the box" or an iteration of it. This category of meaning traces the transformation of her relationship to faith, which was initially structured around checking boxes and later around a sincere, but structurally blind Catholic identity. After Gabriel's disclosure, the scaffolding of the Catholic institution was stripped away from her faith, and her belief system became rooted in a genuine faith in Jesus Christ, rather than in the structure of organized religion.

Bion (1962) described - K, in part, as a destruction of the capacity to know, and as a defense against the pain of contact with reality. Thus, - K is a structured not-knowing, and a way of organizing experience so that certain kinds of knowing remain unknown and unfelt. - K can operate at the level of an individual, but it can also be at the level of a culture or an institution, and maintained by a group. For Maria, - K operated at this level. Her childhood Catholic formation, and later the Catholicism she inhabited as a devout adult, was organized around a structure of not-knowing that kept certain realities outside of her awareness. She said, "You're

led to believe your faith is what you know, you're following your faith and you're good to go, you're checking all the right boxes and doing all the right things."

Maria described her childhood Catholicism retrospectively. She said, "You just basically said you were Catholic and that was everything that you were supposed to do. You didn't have to do anything else. You just had to say you were Catholic." For Maria, "Growing up, I didn't know there was such a thing as not being Catholic" and "Sometimes, the church and the community they're kind of intertwined." Her specific memory of the beer drinking priest who would come over when she was a child captures this enmeshment perfectly. Maria did not see this camaraderie between the priest and her father as particularly Catholic, as some might, but more as a small town neighborly event. Further, she shared this memory:

> Growing up, I remember every time there was a storm, my grandmother had the holy water that she would throw out. You know, she was blessing everything with holy water, scared of, you know, lightning and storms and whatever. And I can remember my cousins, everybody laughing and saying, 'Oh, look, there she is with her holy water'.

As a child, the Catholic box was checked without reflection on just how much, in some ways, the family was immersed in Catholic culture.

The casual and unreflective quality of this box checking is perhaps best illustrated in Maria's reaction when her husband announced he had signed up for classes to formally become a Catholic. She said:

> [My husband] just came home one day and said, 'Hey, I've signed up for RCIA to become a Catholic'. I'm like, 'Why? Why do you want to do that?' And he's like, 'I don't know. I just feel called to do that.' And I was like, 'I mean, you got to go to class for that,

> really? For a year?' You know, I had no idea you had to go to class. I just thought, you want to be Catholic, so say you're Catholic. I mean, just check that box.

For Maria, at that time, the idea that becoming Catholic was more than checking a box and that it required formal study, was genuinely surprising.

Catholicism as box checking was not limited to Maria's own family. She described her father-in-law's faith in the same way, "I don't think his dad was a praying man. I mean, his dad would say prayers when he needed to, but it was, as my daughter calls it, performative. It was more performative. It would check the box." This performative checking of boxes was reinforced by a community in which being Catholic was simply what you were, rather than something you actively lived or examined.

Later, Maria became more serious about her Catholic faith. She and her husband raised a large family in the Church, and were well known and respected in their Catholic community. As Maria now understands, even this more serious and intentional Catholicism was organized around the same fundamental structure. She said:

> We were the Catholic family, look at all the kids we had…we did all the retreats, we did all the everything, but it was so focused on being Catholic and not really focused on an identity in Christ. And you kind of lose your identity in Catholicism. It's not anything else. And then I guess that's part of being blinded by what you think. You're being really faithful because you're checking off all the Catholic boxes. I mean, married in the church, all the sacraments…we had a lot of kids… We could tell you all about the Catholic faith. And we attended all the Catholic things and did all the right stuff as far as a Catholic goes. Which makes you a good Catholic and you're safe, right? But no.

Maria then captured the embodied quality of this box checking in a single vivid memory. She said:

> I remember one time I bought this T-shirt at one of my Catholic conferences or whatever and it said 'Proud to be Catholic' and [someone] was like 'I can't believe you're wearing that shirt.'…I was like 'why' and he went, 'Proud to be Catholic, isn't pride a sin?' and I was like, 'Oh I hadn't really thought about that.' So it's like now, I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, I wore the proud to be Catholic shirt.'

The T-shirt is the box checking at its most literal and most innocent. Maria wore the identity on her body and displayed it publicly without questioning it. The pride of being Catholic was itself the faith, or what passed for faith. Now, she looks back at herself in that shirt with the clarity of someone who knows what she was inside of.

The structure of box checking also shaped how Maria and her Catholic community understood those outside the faith. She described how practicing Catholics were taught to regard Protestants who claimed to have found genuine faith, "If they only knew they'd be Catholic...if they just came to the Eucharist then they could really have it all" Now, Maria looks at this differently. She said, "Now that I'm not Catholic anymore, I feel like I've been fed. Now I have a faith. I always was like that's bizarre, and no, you just think you have a faith."

The disclosure of Gabriel's abuse did not simply add painful knowledge to an intact system, it actually caused the system to collapse. The boxes that had organized her faith and her sense of safety were revealed to be the structure that had made the abuse possible and invisible. Maria said, "You can't see what you can't see…you're led to believe your faith is what you know, you're following your faith and you're good to go, you're checking all the right boxes and

doing all the right things." The phrase "you're led to believe" is accurate. The not-knowing was not self-generated, it was the product of a formation that led her to believe that the boxes were the faith and that checking them was the same as being devout, and therefore, safe. This was not a failure on Maria's part, it was simply the structure that was passed on to her.

In Bion's conceptualization (1962), the movement from - K toward K, which is toward knowing is painful and disorienting, but generative. For Maria the movement toward K did not begin with Gabriel's disclosure. It had already begun at a Catholic retreat that she attended shortly before his disclosure. During a chaotic morning at the retreat, she described a moment of stillness in which she felt Christ speak to her directly. She said:

> I just felt Jesus say, 'This is how it will be,' this is the part that makes me cry, 'The church will come crumbling down around you but keep your eye on me. Just focus on me. And when the chaos happens just focus on me.'

This moment was already chipping away at the version of Catholicism she was inhabiting at that time. Gabriel's disclosure then completed the dismantling that the retreat had begun.

The movement toward K that began at the retreat and continued through Gabriel's disclosure has continued through Maria's growing understanding of the institutional structures that protect abusers. More significantly, it caused a fundamental reorientation of her faith. She said, "My faith is deeper but my faith was more superficial in the fact that my faith was in Catholicism but not in Christ." She added, "God is not confined to that one piece of bread that you believe in. He is also not confined to those four walls of that church. He's bigger than that." Her faith is now greater than something that solely exists within the boundaries of a religious institution. She suggested this in her reason for participating in this study, "I feel like it's just the

hand of God, in my opinion, that is in all of this." Finally, she sums up her own transformation in this regard, "I think entirely more deeply and not so superficially, as if being Catholic is the answer to every problem in the world."

I noticed that I was intimidated by the intensity of Maria's faith. Her faith registered for me as something different from any relationship to faith I have experienced for myself, and it required me to stay aware of my own felt response so that it did not interfere with my listening. This countertransferential observation is itself data about Maria's current faith, which is no longer the box-checking Catholicism of her formation but something more direct, more intense, and more demanding.

"The farther back I stand and look in, the less sense it even makes."

Throughout the interviews, Maria made statements that point to the retroactive reconstruction of how she thinks about both the Church and her conceptualization of danger. This category of meaning describes this retroactive process of change. Bollas (1987) described the unthought known as thoughts, feelings or experience that is held within the self, but is not yet able to be made conscious, symbolized, or spoken. For Maria, the danger within the Church was an unthought known. It is only in retrospect, that she can consciously know the dark side of the Catholic institution and the danger within it. As she said, "so it's like I'm stepping farther back and I can see more why it happens and how it happens."

The unthought known was present in Maria's own family history and it could only be spoken after Gabriel's disclosure. She said:

> And so it was after we found out about [Gabriel], my mom said something about [the priest who drank beer with my father] which had been our priest, you know, the one I told

> you about from childhood. Mom said, 'Yeah, one time when he was visiting, y'all were running around'. She said, 'Y'all were just little kids and y'all were running around and Father grabbed you and put you on his lap' and she said '[your grandmother] just was so upset and so angry' and she pulled me aside and said 'never let that priest put any of the kids on his lap.' Oh why would she say that? Why did she say that? or Why didn't you tell me that like ever? Like I don't ever remember them warning me, 'Don't go sit on Father' or whatever. So I find it very interesting that now that all of this has come out, my mom tells me that she was warned way back when about that priest.

The thoughts about the priest and his intentions were there in Maria's childhood. The warning was even spoken at that time, by her grandmother to her mother, but for some reason, the concern was never expressed to Maria, or if it was, it stayed in her unconscious. The unthought known sat in the family history, until Gabriel's disclosure made it again spoken.

Others, too, had thoughts about the possible threat this priest posed. Maria said:

> And then there's another friend that I have...a friend that I have from way back when, when I was at that small public school in that tiny community and she remembers being creeped out by [the same priest] and she wrote something about it on social media...so I guess there was some stuff going on that I just didn't know.

This unknowing was not because Maria was less perceptive than her friend or her grandmother, but it was because the framework she existed in kept her from consciously knowing. What the others sensed was not knowable to her within that framework.

The institution of the Catholic Church also maintained this not-knowing. Maria described a certain priest's most frequent homily topic:

> And, you know, for the sermon, the homily he gave most was about gossip, which now we look back and we go, 'Well, yeah, that makes perfect sense'. Because right now, if you talk about this, that's gossip. You're gossiping about your priest. You're gossiping. But it's like, no, this is not gossiping. This is like, this is going to save a child's life.

The homily about gossip was the mechanism for keeping the unthought known unthought. If one spoke of their suspicions about a priest, it was framed as gossip, or a moral failing. The enforcement of silence was taught from the altar as a virtue.

She also described a book she had that contained Catholic teachings and prayers:

> I mean, why didn't they just warn us? Because, you know, we talked about that little blue book and I need to go find that little blue book. I wish I could remember the name because I had probably about ten copies of that stupid little blue book, which said you don't say anything bad about a priest.

Maria had multiple copies of a book that urged the faithful to pray for priests rather than to criticize them. The unthought known was not only maintained from the pulpit, but from the printed word that was published and circulated.

The retroactive reframing that occurred after Gabriel's disclosure also extends to Maria's understanding of what constitutes danger and where danger hides. She described herself as a fiercely protective mother who guarded her children carefully from people she identified as potentially dangerous. She said of being abused herself:

> It was by a [neighbor] and I always protected my kids from everybody's [neighbor] because I thought [neighbors] were bad. You know, so I said I didn't think I needed to

> protect my own children from our priest but they didn't get to go spend the night at other people's houses. So protective.

However, the danger turned out to be in the place she had designated as safe. She said:

> I honestly just didn't think that happened in a church. So yeah, right. Unless it was like, you know, the Kool-Aid drinking kind of cult church that you'd hear about on TV. Yeah, not right, right? But those were weird people anyway, and you would know they were weird. Oh, was I so wrong.

The cult church was recognizably dangerous because it was visibly strange. The Catholic Church was not visibly strange, instead it was the comfortable and familiar community that Maria had grown up in, including her school, the priest drinking beer at her home, and her grandmother sprinkling holy water during storms. It is impossible to see danger in something so known and familial.

Maria and her husband initially defended the Church against the accusations that turned out to be true. She said:

> How could I know? So we defended…My husband worked with this man who kept saying, 'Oh, all those priests are pedophiles' or something like that. I can't remember exactly what he said. But my husband's like, 'No, they're not'. And here we were with the priest abusing our own child.

Before their son's abuse was known to them, it was entirely logical and reasonable to defend the Church and its priests. When I reflected back to Maria that a priest in the Catholic faith stands as God and that to question the priest is to question God, she confirmed this immediately, "Correct. To question the priest would be to question God." From inside that formation, defending the

priest against accusations of abuse was not a failure of judgment, it was what one does as a faithful Catholic.

The retroactive reframing has also revealed to Maria what the specific mechanisms are by which devout Catholic mothers were targeted. She said:

> I think most of the, so many of the priests, the ones who follow them are the moms and the women. Those are who are closest to them...the women are groomed more and we more easily fall because Father's so funny, Father's so cute. We want the holiness, we want to be doing right, you know, Father's showing me a little bit more attention than somebody else. So, oh, these women will fall all over them or say Father's so handsome, did you see that? Oh, if he wasn't a priest, you know, I think that pulls us in and we just, we're totally blind. It seems to me that the more devout Catholic you are, the easier your kids are to be the target. Mainly because they're available, you don't have to go look for, you've already groomed the parents, you've groomed the mother, you inserted yourself into that family and the reason that you would have done that, as a priest, which I'm learning, is because that family is financially stable or can offer something, has good standing in the community, so their child is not going to tell.

Maria also named something that is often overlooked in discussions of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. She said:

> The spiritual abuse is something that I think is very much understated. You get the sexual abuse, but I don't think people realize the spiritual abuse that comes with that. I think that may be the difference between being abused by a family member or something like some

> relative, whatever, or teacher, and then being abused in the church. The spiritual aspect is huge and that makes the difference.

The retroactive reframing for Maria is not only about understanding the grooming of mothers and the institutional structures that protected abusers. It is also about understanding that what was done to Gabriel was not only a sexual violation but a spiritual one, and that the spiritual dimension of the abuse is inseparable from the Catholic context in which it occurred.

The process of retroactive reframing is ongoing for Maria, as she described:

> The farther back, I guess, I stand and look in, the less sense it even makes. If that's right, if I'm trying to say that right. So it's like I'm stepping farther back and I can see more why it happens and how it happens. And why we can't see it as Catholic moms. Like why we would ever guess that?

The danger she so carefully protected her children from was not where she thought it was, instead it was within a place that was so carefully structured that it was not even possible to think of such danger, even being a possibility, within its framework.

"You look at them going, but wait, you knew me, like you came to my house."

After Gabriel's disclosure, Maria experienced the collapse of her Catholic community, in addition to the rupture with her Catholic faith and practice. Many of the people she had worshipped with, raised her children alongside or shared meals with either disappeared, turned against her and her family or were only willing to offer whispered support. This category of meaning describes the devastating loss of her Catholic community. Maria named this loss when she reflected:

> I guess for other mothers thinking of myself and thinking about the loss and the betrayal how much a person loses, I don't think it's the faith thing, the faith does not come first, you don't lose your Catholic association with the church first, you first lose your friends in your community and then comes the church, so I think that is in a sense the most hurtful to a family is that what they thought would be their support group is not.

Bion (1952) described a tension that exists, within any group, between what he called *work group mentality* and *basic assumption mentality.* The work group operates consciously and rationally in service of the group's stated purpose. For the Catholic community, the work group's purpose is clear, to live out the teachings of Christ, to forgive, to show compassion, and to be merciful as Christ is merciful. Maria herself named these values when she reflected on what she had learned in her Catholic community:

> That was supposed to be your support system in times of trouble or challenge. Because that's everything you've ever learned about how to treat people, you've learned right there. You've learned to forgive. You've learned to be compassionate. You've learned to be merciful as Christ is merciful. I mean, all these things. The scriptures about anybody who harms a child should have a millstone thrown around their neck and cast into the sea. Okay, all these things. But yet when it happens, these are the people who run away from you the most. They all left.

The space between what the work group professes and what the basic assumption group does is the wound that Maria is describing.

Bion described *basic assumption mentality* as the aspect of the group that is subject to powerful emotional drives, uses primitive defense mechanisms, and diverts the group from its

stated purpose. When a threat arises that destabilizes the group's fundamental assumptions, the group mobilizes to protect itself rather than to serve its individual members. Gabriel's disclosure was this type of threat to the group's Catholic community. The *dependency basic assumption*, in which the group maintains its cohesion through passive deference to an idealized and omnipotent leader, was directly threatened by the revelation that one of their priests had abused a child. If the group were to acknowledge the abuse, they would have to acknowledge that their leader was not what they had idealized. Maria's Catholic community could not stand to admit their leader was flawed and so they turned on Maria and her family.

Maria described how her husband, who was a visible and respected member of their Catholic community, suddenly found himself invisible to the people he had worshipped alongside for years. She said:

> For there was a period of time where every time my husband would see the other [men from our church], ninety-nine out of one hundred would not speak to my husband. One of them had the nerve to come up to my husband and whisper to him, 'Look, I support you, but I can't do this in public.' Okay, well then, no need, don't whisper. I mean it got to the point where people would whisper to us in public and I'm like, don't even, like don't even come to me and whisper and tell me you support me when you can't even, you want to pull me in the corner so other people can't see you talking to me, like that is a kind of betrayal and loss that I don't think counselors are hitting on or people even understand.

The whisperers' loyalty to the community's basic assumption was stronger than their loyalty to what they presumably knew was right.

Further, Maria's family was accused of attacking the very institution they had devoted their family life to. She said, "We had the one side where people thought we were attacking the church" and "My husband had somebody accuse him literally of saying, you're suing God. I was like, no, not suing God. Literally that's what they told him, like he caught hell" In other words, to many in the parish community, Maria, her son, and the rest of the family were not victims in need of support, but an enemy to stave off.

The personal dimension of this community betrayal was particularly devastating. Maria said:

> You have the betrayal of the abuser. That's bad enough. But then the people that you went to church with who are now calling you a liar, like how does... You look at them going, 'But wait, you knew me. Like you came to my house. Like we shared dinner together. Like we drank coffee together. Like our kids were raised together.' And do you think I'm lying? Or you think my child is lying? Or you don't want anything to do with me?"

The loss of community affected Maria's children as well, she said, "My kids lost all their friends too. I mean, it wasn't just me. It was their friends that they had known forever because we were in the Catholic circle." Maria had to hold the extended family together while managing her own devastation. She said:

> Everybody was traumatized. Nobody knew what to do. So it was literally like me, you know, as a mother, you're trying to hold the whole family together. So at this point, it's not just holding my kids together, me and my husband together. It's holding his parents together, holding my family together.

For some families, Maria reflected, the Catholic community is their only community. She said, "For some people, that is their whole entire community, it's their church, and if you lose that and your faith comes next, where do you go, I mean to me, that's just you're ready for the crazy house."

Maria did not anticipate where genuine support would actually come from. She described it:

> And then you got left with the people who left the church or people you didn't even know. People who were not even Christian. And you're like, wait a minute. Why are these the people helping me? These are not supposed to be the people helping me. So your eyes are very much opened.

Some of the aspects of Maria's feelings about losing community and losing trust were paralleled in my counter-transferential data. I noticed during my interviews with Maria that I felt a need to establish connection with her, which I unconsciously did by mentioning, more times than necessary, that I had grown up in the South as she did. On reflection, I understand this as a counter-transferential response to a felt sense of reserve in Maria, perhaps fatigue, or perhaps the wariness of someone whose community has betrayed her. The reserve I felt is, perhaps, data about trust and its cost for Maria. An unknown researcher asking her for personal reflection about a painful topic would certainly activate any feelings she has about trust in the wake of her former Catholic community's betrayal. I even carry a last name that suggests that I am Catholic.

Our exchange about pseudonyms was also revealing. When I asked Maria to choose names for herself and Gabriel, she asked me to choose them. I have two thoughts about this moment, which came at the end of our time together. The first is that she was simply too

exhausted by what has happened to spend bandwidth on such a task. The second is that she was, in her own way, expressing trust by allowing me to make this choice on her behalf. Both may be true, and either way, the moment registers with what Maria has been left with after the rupture with her Catholic community.

"You know, so it's like I have this compassion, now that I can see through these things."

Maria's sense of compassion before Gabriel's disclosure was shaped by her Catholic community, which taught her genuine values of forgiveness, mercy and compassion. Her compassion was real, but as she now reflects, it was organized around checking the right boxes, around being a good Catholic, and around the categories of mercy and forgiveness as they were taught and practiced within her Catholic circle. These values were internalized in an intellectualized fashion. After Gabriel's disclosure and after the family was ostracized by their Catholic community, Maria's lived sense of compassion expanded into something that has found a broader application and deeper meaning. This category of meaning describes this transformation.

Melanie Klein (1940) described the depressive position as a developmental achievement and as a stance in which one is capable of perceiving others as whole and complex people, who contain both good and bad. In the depressive position, one can tolerate ambivalence, grief, and the anxiety of caring about someone, while knowing one could hurt them or lose them. In the depression positive, one has gathered the splits of the good and the bad in service of holding human complexity. Gabriel's disclosure and Maria's abandonment by her Catholic community reorganized her sense of who deserves compassion and in whom genuine virtue lives. Maria can

now perceive the whole person as holding historical wounds beneath their visible and sometimes off-putting struggles.

Maria is clear about the tension she exists in between trying to hold compassion and the pull toward bitterness. She said:

> There's anger, but there's not... I have to be careful with my anger because sometimes I want to become that bitter person who just wants to tear everybody up and scream at everybody and go, 'How could you not know this? How could you not see this? Or how could you not say something?' You know, especially to the generations before us. Because I feel like, why did you not do something? Because if you had done something, maybe I wouldn't be the one doing this right now. It wouldn't be my child. Or anybody else's for that matter. But if I had known more. If somebody had warned me, I could have been more cautious.

Her anger is justified, but she is holding it deliberately and she chooses to keep it from destroying her compassion.

The shift in Maria's worldview is perhaps most salient in these comments:

> When I see homeless people, I see people who, you know, especially like somebody who's on the street corner begging for money. They're on drugs. They're filthy dirty. And you can tell they're all wigged out or whatever. And now I just go, you know, some mother gave birth. I wonder if it was a hard birth. Did she love that child? And now maybe she don't even know where he is. You know, so it's like I have this compassion now that I can see through these things. And so I guess it saddens me when people can't.

Maria sees through the exterior to a possible challenging history in a way she did not before.

She described this same shift when she told me about touring a prison with a group of women she knows:

> So we did this prison tour and we had this young guy who would come and talk to us in the chapel and he is a veteran… yet here he was in prison and we didn't go into detail about why he was in prison or whatever…And so afterwards, we all got in the car and we're like, why is this American hero, this veteran, this young man who fought and was blown up twice? And obviously, you know, he talked about the PTSD. Why is he in prison? We didn't bother even asking him. But on the way home, we decided we would google his name. Turns out he raped two women, both while he was on drugs, after he had gotten out of the military. And they talked about the PTSD, which caused him to drink and do some drugs. He ended up raping two women…But then there was some information in this about him that talked about he was sexually abused as a young boy. And we were all like, okay, so how many, how many of these men who are in this facility were sexually abused as young boys? And this is why they're here. And so it gave every single woman in there a whole different perspective on these men. Yes, they need to be punished for what they did…But I'm talking about where real compassion needs to be made when there's like a real trauma, But I think we don't have enough compassion for people, and we don't act enough.

The veteran is both perpetrator and victim, and the homeless man is both wigged out and deserving of compassion. Maria has become able to hold both without resolving this tension.

Maria reflected on how she now thinks about compassion and what she sees in the Church:

> Most of it just truly saddens me because we think we're being good people sometimes. I think many of these people just think they're being good Catholics by defending the Church or defending the priest. But it saddens me that we don't think of other people. And I guess, I mean, my whole viewpoint of people who deserve mercy and compassion is a whole lot different.

Further, she added, "Grown people, especially people who consider themselves Christian and practicing Christians, sometimes I feel like they're almost the worst. So, I don't know. It just saddens my heart that we can't have more compassion for other people." Here, Maria is experiencing the grief that occurs when one is able to see the dichotomy between the goodness people are capable of and the choices that they make.

Klein (1940) understood the depressive position, not as a permanent developmental achievement, but as a position that must be worked toward again and again in the face of such destabilizing occurrences as trauma, loss, and betrayal. For Maria, this is evident in her efforts to manage her anger, hold complexity, and resist the pull toward bitterness. Her expanded compassion is an active and ongoing practice, and it is something that she achieved as a result of extremely painful betrayals.

Conclusion

My conversations with Maria yielded four categories of meaning that described her lived experiences. The four categories of meaning also demonstrate how she has made sense of her experiences, or found a way to go on being despite the abuse, disclosure, and betrayal. Maria has accomplished this through a reconstruction of what faith means to her, a retroactive reframing of

the institutional church and the location of danger, by processing the betrayal and loss of her Catholic community, and by expanding what it means to be compassionate.

To conclude with Maria's own words, I asked her to speak to how this experience has changed her. She replied:

> Oh my gosh, question everything. Question everything. Like my boundaries have changed. My circle of friends have changed. My whole community as I knew it has changed...it has also changed me in my faith and what I believe...I focused on Christ… I've become very...a cynic maybe when it comes to that kind of stuff...I don't know it's changed me in so many different ways with friends, trusting people, how I relate to people. I can relate to people on the street.

Case Five: Stephanie

General Information

Stephanie is in her 60s and Caucasian. She and her husband have been married for decades. She lives in a suburban area in a southwestern state and has a Bachelor's degree. She and her husband have adult children, as well as grandchildren. She is no longer a practicing Catholic.

Stephanie, along with her husband and children, were very active participants in their Catholic parish while their children were growing up. Later, she simultaneously worshipped at both a Catholic church with her husband, and at a Protestant denomination. Once her son, Rob, disclosed his abuse, she stopped attending religious services. She now holds her Christian faith outside of a structured denomination.

Being Catholic

Stephanie described her history with Catholicism:

> Both my parents were born and raised Catholic and so, of course, you know, my [only sibling] and I, were raised Catholic. When I was very, very young, toddler-ish, kindergarten, around that age, my mom didn't even go to church, which was, I think about that now, it's kind of crazy, because she was pretty devout. So my dad was the one that went to church, but eventually we sort of galvanized as a family and went to church regularly. I went to Catholic school until fourth grade and then we moved, and that was not an option, so I went to public school after that, but I stayed in catechism, did all the Catholic things. I did all sacraments, every single one of them… Once I graduated from high school and started working and going to college, I was always Catholic in my heart, but didn't really get to church a whole lot.

She further reflected on being Catholic as a child:

> I can remember just looking forward to my first communion because of the dresses, the pomp and the circumstance and I would look forward to, like we had, we really celebrated the Blessed Mother in the month of May. We had, you know, the processions. So I liked all of that around it. I was, like I said, a talker. I got kicked out of church a couple of times for my chatting. But, I don't know, sitting outside on a bench outside of church to me was not a punishment…So, yeah, unless you're Catholic, you can't understand a lot of that… But, you know, my parents did their best. Now I appreciate, even though I am not Catholic per se, I look back and I do appreciate the gift of faith that they gave to me.

Stephanie wanted to give her own children a solid foundation of faith, as she described:

> The faith foundation to me was super important because I understood that that seems to be the place that I always came back to no matter what was going on was my faith and my reliance on God and looking to Him for guidance and hope. And so I wanted to give my children that too, sort of that sense of regardless of what's going in your life, if you have this foundation of faith, you'll have somewhere to go. You'll have some place to go to, you know, to get comfort, et cetera, et cetera. And it was community. I mean, we were super involved. I mean, like super involved. I could have lived at the church and it would have been okay.

In the present, Stephanie feels that:

> I don't regret my Catholic upbringing. Looking at it from an adult lens, there's a lot of things that, I don't know, I can see now that sort of set the foundation for my son being abused, as far as the compliance, the adulation of priests, you know, all that kind of stuff. So I look back on that, and that just kind of makes me cringe a little bit but I think it also formed some of the good parts of me.

Rob

Stephanie described Rob as a child, "From the moment he was born, he was just such an easy, gregarious, life-loving child. The world was his oyster…there were so many things that made him just so much fun to be around all the time." As Rob grew up he became an outgoing young man and a leader. Stephanie told a story about him, that occurred during his high school years, and that demonstrates his personality:

> Rob was just, he was just, he was a great young person in the sense that, 'Let's do it.' You know, he would just show up. ..He would show up every time and participate and help… One time when we had Mass there was some sort of noxious odor in the church and they had to call the fire department and we had big Masses there. There's a lot of people in that small community so we had to bring all the people out of the church and we had an amphitheater in the back of the church that we had to soak. My son [as a teenager], gets up in front of all of these people, and he is like Moses leading the people and he's directing these people. He takes the entire congregation back to the amphitheater and as he's being fed information, he's feeding it to them and then when it was time to bring everybody back, again, there he is, 'Okay, everybody, let's go back' and he brings everybody back into the church. This is just who Rob was. is. I mean, that's who he is. Even as an adult, he's a leader, one-hundred percent.

Rob now has his own children, is married and holds a steady job. He has struggled with substance abuse in the past. He still struggles emotionally when he is triggered or reminded of the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, but Stephanie said:

> In spite of his abuse, dysfunction, all of the things that he's had to carry, he's a really good parent. Really, really good. I mean, he's, you know, had his moments, but I, we, we've had conversations about his conversations with his kids and I'm just in awe of him sometimes. He has learned so much in his life and he imparts that in all aspects of his life, his work life and his personal life. He's a really good dad.

The Disclosure

Stephanie had suspicions, for years, that Rob had been abused by a priest. She said that an attorney contacted the family while building a case:

> So when he contacted us, I was the first one that he talked to, and I had had suspicions. So that kind of got the ball rolling, but my son was the one that actually said, this is what happened to me. The attorney voiced suspicions. My son, yes, said, yes, it's true.

She added that Rob "came and we sat out on our patio and he told us what had happened and the very thing I was afraid to hear all those years, all those years, happened."

Of that moment, Stephanie described her own experience as:

> Oh my gosh, so many thoughts and feelings. I couldn't, I couldn't move, I almost couldn't breathe. I just didn't, I just didn't know what to do with all of them, and the only thing that I could say to him was I told him I said, 'I knew. I knew.' I said, 'Honey, you can stop, you don't, you don't have to, you don't have to go any further, because it was like he was almost apologizing you know, and I said it's fine and I just, I was numb… Like, just, I don't know how you can describe dropping to your knees. Because it just takes all the wind out of your sails. That's how I felt.

After the Disclosure

Stephanie described what the aftermath of Rob's disclosure was like for her:

> So the next couple of months were just me running around like a crazy person, trying to fix everybody, me, everybody, and that's when I started going to therapy. Because I was pretty much on my knees at this point…So I go to my first therapy session and my therapist is wonderful. And I'm like, you know, so she does the, you know, 'Why are you

> here? How can I help you?' So I go through the whole abuse thing, you know, in a Reader's Digest version and I just want to continue and so she goes, 'Well, would you like to continue this? I think we could do some work together' and I'm like, 'You know what? I would really like to do this.' and she said as I was on the way out, she stopped and she said, 'So next time we're gonna talk about you.' I was like, 'I'm not the problem here', but she was a hundred percent right, my codependency was super toxic in all of this and I needed to cut the strings and let this boy figure out what he needed to figure out.

Telling Her Story

Stephanie described her reaction to the email she received while I was recruiting participants for this study, "When I first had the email, I went, what? Somebody really cares? That's awesome. I mean, yeah, I mean, that was a big thing." Stephanie was also clear about why she was willing to be a part of this research,

> I wanted to do this because I frankly would love to be a more out there advocate…but to protect my son's privacy, I would not do that…I just know that he would be best served if I was quiet and so this came along and gave me an opportunity to do something positive in such a horrific, awful situation where I feel like I can give back and being part of your study, sort of literally, hopefully add some sort of insight that will help therapists with moms of abused children across the United States. How does it get any better than that?

Pseudonyms

When I asked Stephanie to chose pseudonyms for herself and her son, she said, "Oh gosh, I'm never good at this. Why don't you call me Stephanie? I don't know where I'm getting that,

but and we'll call [my son] Robert or Rob." It seems that on an unconscious register, Stephanie echoed another statement she made in choosing her son's pseudonym. Previously, when speaking of the abuse she told me, "It robbed so much of that from him for so long. It changed the trajectory of his life." The name, Rob, serves as a constant reminder of how much was robbed from her son, and in turn, from her and the family.

The name Stephanie is associated with Saint Stephen, the first martyr (Campbell, n.d.-b) and the word martyr originates in the Greek word for "witness" (Harper, n.d.). Stephanie is indeed a witness to the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse crisis in the Church. She also offered her participation in this study as a form of witness.

My Experience of Stephanie

Somehow, speaking with Stephanie felt so easy that I had to keep reminding myself that we were talking about a very difficult topic. She felt very much like someone I could befriend if I had met her in a casual situation or if she lived in my neighborhood. I am not sure what to make of that. Even though there are many differences in our backgrounds and experiences, she somehow felt similar to me.

I also noticed that I had a very atypical reaction, for me, to something she said at the very beginning of our second interview. I asked her how she felt after our first interview and if she had been ok. She responded, "I was just having a moment of prayer before, you know asking God to let me be his vessel of healing for other folks and for your work, so I'm honored to be part of that." I, personally, am not religious and as I stated previously, I have never really connected to faith, despite my religious upbringing. I tend to cringe when someone mentions

prayer, particularly if it is connected to me. However, with Stephanie, the reference to her moment of prayer before meeting with me felt comfortable, which is quite unusual for me.

Categories of Meaning

An analysis of Stephanie's interviewed created four categories of meaning. These categories of meaning describe how Stephanie has preserved her faith by holding the religious institution and her faith separately, how unconscious knowledge shaped her life before it was consciously known, how Stephanie carries ongoing grief for her son and herself, and how Stephanie has been personally transformed through extensive psychotherapy. To keep each category grounded in her experience, I use a single quote from Stephanie to title each category of meaning.

"Screw the church. The church is not the Savior in all of this. God is the Savior."

This category of meaning describes Stephanie's separation of her faith from institutional, organized religion. By holding her beliefs apart from the institution of religion and the Catholic Church, she can preserve her relationship with God while processing the institutional failure that allowed Rob's abuse. Stephanie has the capacity to hold the tension of both the institutional betrayal and her continuing faith simultaneously. The ability to hold this type of tension is associated with Klein's depressive position (1940), which involves the ability to hold both the good and the bad of the same object simultaneously, and to be able to tolerate ambivalence. From our conversations, it is clear that Stephanie's ability to hold her faith separately from the Church as an institution developed over time, beginning long before Rob's abuse and disclosure, but shaped into its current form as a result of it.

Stephanie's early Catholic formation gave her an appreciation of the gift of faith. In fact, she uses the word "faith" thirteen times in her transcript. In speaking about her parents, she said, "Now I appreciate, even though I am not Catholic per se, I look back and I do appreciate the gift of faith that they gave to me." She also wanted her own children to have this same gift of faith, "The faith foundation to me was super important…I wanted to give my children that too,…that sense of regardless of what's going in your life, if you have this foundation of faith, you'll have somewhere to go."

Stephanie's ability to hold multiple faith systems simultaneously was further developed during the time when she had suspicions that Rob was abused but was not yet certain. She was pulled towards a Protestant church that her grandchildren were connected to, but also continued to attend Mass with her husband, "So I kind of had a foot in both churches when my husband… was home on a Sunday, we'd go to the Catholic church. When he wasn't home on Sundays, I'd go to the [Protestant] church." Stephanie was able to hold both simultaneously, and did not need, at that time, to definitively choose one or the other.

After the disclosure, however, Stephanie abandoned organized religion and leaned on her faith for sustenance, "And I haven't been back to church since." However, she has had to attend funerals at a Catholic Church, and her words about these experiences make her ability to hold her faith and relationship with God separate from the institutional church explicit:

> I had to, I had to keep redirecting myself as to the reason why I was there, you know, and stop thinking about and looking at the priest and going, hmm I wonder if he's that sort, you know all the sheep that are there, you know horrible thoughts, you know they're just buying into the whole Catholic, you know, sham, and you know just all of that negative

> remembering. I was there for a [relative] who I dearly loved and I was with family who I dearly love and it felt like a great privilege to to be in their company and that I had to remember this was God's house first and foremost, Catholic was secondary and so it was, it was a conscious self-talk thing the whole time just and and asking God just to quiet my spirit and just, you know, let me be there for for my family and my [relative] and you know I was very unsettled the whole time.

This statement makes her theological position that God is separate from religious institutions perfectly clear. She said, further, "So my faith has never wavered as far as my faith in God has never wavered."

Stephanie suggested that she can tolerate the ambivalence in her situation when she spoke of not attending church, "No church, zero church, but to be honest, I do miss it. We have talked about maybe starting to look at other churches that might suit us, but we haven't done anything about it. We just talked about it." She also said, "Here's another irony. We do volunteer at a Catholic…food pantry," which she explained:

> I think it's removed enough from the church, so to speak. I don't have to deal, we don't deal with clergy or, you know, a lot of the people that work or that volunteer and work there are, like on Ash Wednesdays, people always are on Wednesdays, everybody came in with their ashes and stuff like that. So it was kind of one of those, you know, makes you twitch, reminder kind of things. But I just, you know, everybody's got their own life to live. I can't judge other people for how they practice their faith. I might have an opinion about, you know, what the church is doing with their money or, you know, the cover up and all that kind of stuff. But I can't decide what's right or wrong for somebody else.

> They just don't know what my lived experience has been and the choices that I make. But it's very gratifying. I love working there. I love working with the people. There's something very basic about providing people with food that I think is just human dignity, right?

Stephanie demonstrated that she can maintain a type of relationship with Catholicism on her own terms, even in spite of what happened to Rob and by extension, to her family.

Further, she sees this ability to maintain her faith outside of organized religion as what sustains her in the wake of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. She advises other mothers in her position to do the same, "I've never said, why me? I think that's my faith. That's the thing that I would say to other mothers. If you can find a way to maintain your faith through all this, that might be the saving grace." More explicitly, she said:

> I would encourage moms to, you know, screw the Church. The Church is not the Savior in all of this. God is the Savior. So try to find God where you find him, you know, whether it's another church or, I don't know, however that works for you.

Stephanie then added her thoughts about her faith:

> So my faith has never wavered, as far as my faith in God, has never wavered. It's been, it's been my comfort. It's been my hope. It's been all the things, you know, that God is, especially because he always he meets us every day, but particularly in our darkest times. So that's never changed. My faith in the church, though…"

Finally, I felt the texture of Stephanie's faith, myself, during our interviews. As I stated previously, I asked her how she was feeling after our first conversation, and she said, "I was just having a moment of prayer before, you know, asking God to let me be his vessel of healing for

other folks and for your work, so I'm honored to be part of that." The fact that I did not feel my typical discomfort in the face of such a statement speaks to the lack of institutional, or even performative quality of her faith. Instead, her words and her voice conveyed the purity of her relationship with God that has been disconnected from the Church. My own experience in that moment was data about her faith and how it is available to her as she has separated it from the institution that failed her son.

Klein (1940) would conceptualize Stephanie and her faith as exemplifying the depressive position. Stephanie has separated her good faith from the bad of the Church, yet she can acknowledge the existence of both. Further, Stephanie holds her ambivalence about someday returning to organized practice honestly, "You know, like I said, I really did enjoy going to the [Protestant] church. I felt fed in a spiritual way like I never had before. And maybe someday I'll get back there. I don't know. We'll see."

"Something kept saying to me, something's really wrong here."

This category of meaning traces Stephanie's suspicions, or her not completely conscious knowledge, of Rob's abuse, to the point when it became fully conscious. For years before Rob's disclosure, knowledge of his abuse operated under cover in Stephanie's dreams, her instincts, her direct questioning, and in her church attendance before it was brought into conscious thought. Stephanie's experience reflects what Bollas (1987) described as the unthought known, which is knowledge that shapes a person's life before it is formulated in a way that can be symbolized or reflected on. The moment Rob disclosed his abuse, "He told us what had happened and the very thing I was afraid to hear all those years, all those years happened," was also the moment in which all the suspicions that Stephanie had carried became thinkable. Her response to Rob, "I

knew, I knew," articulates the structure of a type of knowing that was already present but had not yet been brought into conscious thought.

The unthought known first appeared in one of Stephanie's dreams. She told me:

> Here's a weird thing. When Rob was young, young, like, I don't know, childhood, I had a dream that he was abused. I had a dream and I don't know where it came from and it stuck with me for a long, long time and I kept thinking, 'Oh, maybe it was something I read or a movie I had watched.' So there's something on some weird, spiritual, self-conscious level that was maybe, I don't know, warning me, preparing me. I don't know what that was about, but it happened.

Stephanie looked for a concrete reason that she had this dream, but she could not find one. The dream stayed with her for years as a bit of knowledge that did not make sense to her.

When Rob was an early adolescent, Stephanie noticed changes in his behavior. She described him as going from being "the light of the world" to getting into fights at school, and days when "he was just so dark." During this time, her sense that something was wrong began to take shape, although it remained only a sense. She described it,

> Something kept saying to me, something's really wrong here. This is not, we don't have a history that I felt like, I mean, I'm not a psychologist, but from what my understanding of how a lot of people come to this depth… there's infidelity in their parents' marriage, there's divorce, there's death, which we did have death, or there's abuse.

Here, the unthought known was beginning to push for formulation.

Her sibling repeatedly asked Stephanie if she was sure nothing had happened to Rob:

> And my [sibling] kept saying, are you sure nothing happened? Are you sure?…And I

> kept telling [them], 'Listen, all I can do is ask and I ask and he says no.' So I just have to leave it alone. I can't badger him about it.

Her sibling's questions merged with Stephanie's own suspicions, but Stephanie could not move beyond Rob's denials. The knowledge remained outside of concrete thought.

Stephanie asked Rob if he had been abused directly and repeatedly many times. She said, "I would pointedly, over time, ask him, 'Did Father [X] ever do anything to you? Did he ever put hands on you? Was he ever inappropriate with you?' And he would tell me, no, oh, God, no. If he did, I would have…" At that time, Stephanie could ask Rob directly because the knowledge, or the thought, was coming closer to consciousness. Rob's denials, which she sensed were not the full truth, kept the knowledge from crossing the threshold into thought. As she put it, "He'd say no, nothing happened. But again, my radar kind of said, 'I'm not so sure he's telling the truth.'"

During this same time, between the time that Rob was abused and the time he disclosed his abuse, Stephanie's religious practice was shifting away from the Catholic Church and toward a Protestant church. Perhaps this was the result of the unthought known that was making its way to consciousness and preparing Stephanie for a way to hold onto her faith without the Catholic Church. While she continued to attend Mass with her husband when he was home on Sundays, she also began attending a Protestant church, that was connected to her grandchildren, on the Sundays he was not home. She described it:

> And we had had a good [X] years of, you know, service to the church and I was kind of at a point where I think I'm done. I think I just want to go to church. So I kind of had a foot in both churches when my husband,…when he was home on a Sunday, we'd go to the Catholic church. When he wasn't home on Sundays, I'd go to the [Protestant] church.

The fact that Stephanie was attending two different churches had the manifest explanation of her husband's schedule. The latent explanation is that Stephanie was moving into an alternative spiritual home that did not depend on the Catholic Church. The unthought known was shaping her life before she could even articulate it.

Later, as the Catholic Church abuse crisis began to appear in the news more and more often, Stephanie's suspicions became more focused, as she described:

> And at that time, that's when all of the church scandal was starting to blow up. So coincidentally with that, Father [X], who I just referred to as [X] now, because he's not a priest anymore, in my eyes. Anyway, there were murmurings of inappropriate behavior, and he was moving from church to church to church and so, you know, my brain is starting to put two and two together. Well, this is happening here. This is happening with my son.

The unthought known came fully to consciousness when two events converted suspicions to reality. First, there was a memory that Stephanie's husband had not originally thought of as significant. Stephanie said:

> There was one time when my husband was talking to the pastor in the rectory…and they walked down the hallway where all the private quarters were and [X]'s door was open and as they were walking by, [X] was in there with a young boy and the pastor says to my husband, you know, kind of acts as if he'd talked to him about that, 'I'm going to have to talk to him about that again' and then just keeps walking, and my husband, he's just this lover of people. He always thinks good things about everybody. He never thinks anything bad about people, just generally speaking. Didn't think twice about it until later and he's

> like, 'Oh, my God' and then, you know, we start to put two and two together, thinking about how many times [X] said, 'Hey, can Rob come back to blah, blah, blah, so I can show him [something]?' Literally asking us permission and we're like, 'Yeah, sure, go ahead.' Kill me now.

The "kill me now" statement reflects the power of the realization that Stephanie was seeing what had been there all along.

The second event that converted suspicion to reality was when an attorney contacted the family. The attorney was looking for victims to build a case. After the attorney spoke with Rob and Rob remained evasive when Stephanie asked him about it, Stephanie felt a sense of dread, which she described as, "My mom, my spidey senses were like, 'Oh, shit. Here we go. It's coming.'" She described the moment when Rob called to ask if he could speak to her:

> He called us in the middle of the day and he said, 'Hey, can I stop by the house?' which was not uncommon…and I'm like 'Sure' but I could hear it in his voice and I knew everything that was going on. He came and we sat out on our patio and he told us what had happened, and the very thing I was afraid to hear all those years all those years happened.

In the moment of Rob's disclosure, Stephanie articulated the thoughts that had been unconsciously operating in her for years. She told Rob, "I knew, I knew." The years of dreams, suspicions, direct questioning, and behaviors that had been carrying this knowledge for her had finally become something speakable and fully knowable. This category of meaning, again, describes Bollas's (1987) concept of the unthought known coming to consciousness and becoming speakable. However, there are aspects of Winnicott's (1974) concept of the fear of

breakdown which also apply. Winnicott conceptualized a certain kind of dread or anxiety as a dread of something that has already happened, but has not yet come fully to consciousness. Stephanie's dread that Rob would be abused preceded her conscious knowledge of it. The event she dreaded had, in fact, already occurred. Although Winnicott described the fear of breakdown around someone's dread when something had already happened to they, themself, and for Stephanie, the catastrophe happened to her son, not to her directly, the idea of dreading something that has already happened is the same.

"There isn't a day that goes by that I don't mourn this."

This category of meaning describes how Stephanie carries her ongoing maternal grief for what was taken from Rob, and by extension, from herself. The grief Stephanie carries cannot be fully resolved by her therapy or by Rob's improved functioning, or by time. The work Stephanie has done in therapy, reorganized how she mothers Rob in the present. Her grief about what was lost in the past is something she still carries. Freud (1917/1957) described mourning as the slow process of decathexis from the lost object, which may take the form of human, ideal, or institution. This process includes decathexis from the mental representation of the lost object. One must hold both the loss and continue to go-on-being in spite of the loss. Similarly, Stephanie's grief occurs daily, it is reactivated by Rob's continuing struggles, and exists in the face of Stephanie's own positive transformation.

Stephanie described the daily and continued nature of her grief in a conversation with Rob:

> I just want you to know that there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about this and how it's affected you and how it's affected us, and there isn't a day that doesn't go by that I don't mourn this.

Rob's experience was similar:

> Like my son told me one day, he said, 'Mom, this will never be gone, it never goes away.' He says, 'I'm just learning how to live with it' and for us too, on a different level, but for us too, it never ever goes away. People don't know.

This grief is not just a phase she can pass through and be finished with. it is something that cannot be undone. As Stephanie put it, "People think, oh, well, you know, you just go to therapy and you fix it…" Psychotherapy was transformative for Stephanie, but it did not and can not resolve what she has lost and is mourning.

Stephanie is mourning the potential trajectory of Rob's life if he not been abused. Stephanie described this when she reflected on Rob as a child, "From the moment he was born, he was just such an easy, gregarious, life-loving child. The world was his oyster. He was a gifted athlete." She continued, "My hope for him, as his mom, my love for him hurt so much because it robbed so much of that from him for so long. It changed the trajectory of his life." She described the shift she saw in him before she knew the reason for it:

> It was right around [X] years old, Rob went from being the light of the world to being in trouble at school, getting into fights. I was on a first name basis with the principal, he was just acting out in a lot of different ways. Just very, he was, there were some days he was just so dark.

Stephanie summed up the difficult years that followed by saying, “And it, you know, it was just, it was just, we were just circling the drain.” Stephanie is mourning the bright trajectory that was altered by clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

There is a particular feature of Stephanie’s grief that emerged in her speech through slips of the tongue. At a couple of points in our conversation, Stephanie described Rob in the past tense and then corrected herself. When she was remembering him as a child, she said, “He was a gifted athlete. He is. I talk about it in the past tense. It’s still true.” When she described the time that Rob, as a teenager, led the congregation out of the church during an emergency, she said, “This is just who Rob was. Is. I mean, that’s who he is.” Stephanie’s slips and her corrections reveal something about what she is thinking and feeling. The Rob she catches herself describing in the past tense is the Rob who would have been had his trajectory not been altered by abuse. This is what she continues to mourn, even though she is in awe of Rob in the present, who is an amazing father and who has bravely overcome many of his challenges.

Stephanie’s grief is brought to the surface when Rob struggles. When Rob is triggered, Stephanie hears it in his voice and feels it in herself. She described this attunement, “I just hear the anxiety and the sadness, you know, then all of those feelings, you know, it starts with anger and then everything else, you know, it’s the trickle down of all the other feelings.” She continued to describe her feelings by saying,

> It just pisses me off that we were duped so badly and again, this man who we trusted with the most precious thing in our lives would do something so heinous. And then, of course, you know, anger, of course, you know, the cover feeling for all the other feelings…So then everything else starts clicking in once you get past the anger, the hurt, for myself, for

> him, for, you know, and that sense of couldn't do anything about it, couldn't protect him. And, you know, it just all comes tumbling back in again. But just thinking about it now, it just makes me so mad.

Stephanie has learned to manage her ongoing grief and continue to go-on-being in spite of it. She described her morning practice, "I try to pray and meditate every morning. I have, besides, you know, scripture, I have this one book that I love, and it's [about letting go]." It is impossible not to note that the words "mourning" and "morning" are homophones. Stephanie's morning/mourning practice gives her the internal resources she needs for whatever the day will bring, but she still gets overwhelmed. She said, "When I see what's not being done about it, you know, and it's when I get the [clergy abuse support group] emails and, you know, this whole Epstein thing and what not." In those moments:

> What I've learned is that I just need to stop. I need to put it down and I need to do something else. I need to redirect until I calm down and then if I choose I want to do something better to respond or to something like that, I do.

Stephanie has learned that sometimes she needs to put down the grief and the feelings that come along with it, "I think I've learned how to process those feelings and sort of put them in their place."

The processing and the putting-in-place that Stephanie describes is the active labor of mourning that Freud (1917/1957) conceptualized. It is also what helps her go-on-being, in Winnicott's (1963) words. Stephanie is mourning the version of Rob that would have been, had he not been abused. Her mourning occurs daily, it is reactivated when he struggles, and it co-exists with her clear recognition of his strengths and successes and her own transformation.

"Therapy was my saving grace, therapy was my saving grace."

This category of meaning describes the transformation that Stephanie has undergone, on several levels, because of her experience with clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. She has personally transformed due to her work in the psychotherapy that began after Rob's disclosure. She has changed the manner in which she relates to Rob as his mother. Finally, she is able to see the "silver lining" of this horrific experience and go-on-being in a productive way.

Winnicott's ideas of the True Self and False Self, as well as his conceptualization of going-on-being, anchor this category theoretically. Winnicott (1965) described the False Self as an organization built around compliance with external demands and the True Self as the more spontaneous and authentic self that emerges when external demands relax their hold. He also described going-on-being (Winnicott, 1963) as the capacity to continue authentic existence and creative engagement across time, a capacity that the experience of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse and its aftermath has tested and reshaped for Stephanie.

Stephanie's childhood self, as a rule-follower and people pleaser, was shaped by Catholic guilt and parentification. She said:

> I was, as a child, a real rule follower…but I also struggled a lot with the guilt, you know, the fires of hell, and, you know, if I don't behave a certain way, which formed me as adult and I had become quite the people pleaser in a lot of respects. I was pretty much parentified from a very young age because my [sibling] was a handful and so I was like, you know, the calm in the house all of the time. And that's sort of an extension of being Catholic, too, right?

This organization continued into Stephanie's adulthood and included the urge to concretely and constantly fix things for those she loved. After Rob's disclosure, Stephanie leaned into this urge to fix things, "So the next couple of months were just me running around like a crazy person, trying to fix everybody, me, everybody and that's when I started going to therapy." Stephanie initially went to therapy thinking that, "You know, I didn't really even know half of what I was feeling, because I kept saying, 'I want to help Rob, I want to help Rob,'" but at the end of the first session, the therapist pivoted and said, "Next time we're gonna talk about you." Stephanie began to work on herself in earnest, and as she described:

> I started to understand that I needed to, I needed to get myself [together] because, you know, I told you I went into therapy on how can I help him. And I started understanding, you know, that I needed to get myself [together] because what I was doing before… was only prolonging some of the issues and so that was, that was a tough time.

Stephanie's transformational work in therapy went even deeper as her husband did his own work alongside her:

> And fortunately, I have a wonderful husband who was trying to do his work through this. So I would go to therapy. I would come home. He would ask me how it went and he never pressured me, but I'm a talker, so I would share with him what I would learn and we would talk about it and he would usually take a couple days to process it and then he would say, 'You know, that really made sense to me', or 'Here's how it affected me.' So that helped us, you know, get closer and closer on the same page and deal with our grief and our anger.

Now, Stephanie is someone who tries to listen, rather than to fix. She described her current self-understanding:

> I work hard at being a good audience is what I try to do, I really do and like I said, for many years, I just thought I knew everything about everything. And my advice was sage and I had answers. And now I just understand I really don't know that much. I don't know that much. So I try to, I try to listen. I try to be a good sounding board. And if I have something I feel might be valuable as far as perspective, sometimes I'll ask, 'Do you want to hear what I think?' or I'll just say it. I try to monitor myself to be loving and supportive and caring and not make it about me.

I could feel Stephanie's transformation, into someone who is inhabiting their True Self and is comfortable in their own skin, for myself as we spoke. I had to keep reminding myself that it is unusual to feel such ease while speaking about such a difficult topic. There were moments when she seemed less like a research participant and more like someone I might befriend if I had met her in another context. After my own reflection, I make sense of this as data about who Stephanie has become through her therapy. Her capacity to be present without intruding, to listen without immediately offering advice, to hold her own experience and mine without collapsing one into the other, is the capacity that her psychotherapy has produced.

Stephanie's transformation includes the way in which she relates to and mothers Rob. She realized, "What I was doing before was not helping him." and "I needed to cut the strings and let this boy figure out what he needed to figure out." In the present, she reflected on this stepping back positively, "Being able to step away and truly just let him figure it out was the healthiest thing I could have ever done for him and for me. Yeah, painful, but…"

She also realized that despite how difficult it was for her not to try to fix things for Rob, this stance has been fruitful. She said, “He has learned so much in his life and he imparts that in all aspects of his life, his work life and his personal life. He’s a really good dad.” Stephanie has also learned not to take it personally when Rob struggles and lashes out, “I knew that this was his trauma just bubbling up and bubbling out and I try not to take it personally. I tried to allow him the space to just express that.” Stephanie has come to trust Rob in his own right and she can now meet his ongoing struggles without trying to fix them.

In retrospect, Stephanie has been able to integrate the experience of Rob’s abuse and disclosure in a meaningful way. She described the experience as a catalyst for her transformation:

> One last thing that I’ll say is that there’s a silver lining, I would never want any of this to happen obviously, but it did happen and one of the things that came out of it was the fact it helped me right my own shit, if that makes sense. It really brought me to a place where I had to understand how I operated in the world and what needed to change for me to become a better functioning, more supportive person and not meddlesome and, you know, God-like thinking in my relationships with people and it’s been very free moving forward. It’s been a road. There are things that have come out of it.

She continued to reflect, and said:

> With the right help you can, you can live it, you can live through it and maybe come out a better person. I feel like I have and I don’t know if it’s because of that or in spite of it, I’m not sure.

I then invited her to consider whether she leaned more towards "because of" or "in spite of" and she replied:

> I would lean towards because… in spite of… can take people down and it can really be a lifelong owner…so there's maybe a little bit of in spite of in this, as it could have took me down, but I really think it's because of it and being willing to be open and vulnerable and to be able to be taught, to be a good listener. That's hard to do when you've been through all of this, because you're pretty sure the world's against you at some of these points.

Finally, Stephanie reflected on what she would like to say to other mothers who have had the same experience, "I would want them to know that there is life after, whatever that looks like. And I don't say that lightly because I know of other mothers who have had different experiences." She also had a caveat:

> One of the things that I do experience is the stigma that I mean, you have to be very careful who you say what to about this whole experience…Actually, I said something to somebody who I thought would understand and would be sort of empathetic about it, and turned out, it was like they looked at me really differently afterwards…so I think there's a lack of understanding out there, and I think there's a stigma that goes with it. And I don't know how you get around it…especially in the Church because they've worked so hard to keep it undercover. So you can't go to your church community to look for support. You cannot…and so that's maybe something for us moms to understand that when we go to look for support, please don't go to your church. Don't. Absolutely. Stop. Don't go past go. Look somewhere else.

This category of meaning traced Stephanie's transformation from the people-pleasing, people-fixing False Self that she developed when she was a child to a mature True Self that is self-aware and reflective. For Stephanie, psychotherapy was the route to this transformed self that can go-on-being in a healthy manner because of, not in spite of, how clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse affected her, Rob, and the rest of her family.

Conclusion

These four categories of meaning, together, create an in-depth portrait of Stephanie's lived experiences around clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. They also provide a sense of how she has made meaning of this experience. The process by which Stephanie has found a way to go on, move forward and organize her life despite Rob's abuse is how she has made meaning of it all. For Stephanie, more specifically, this includes the way in which she now holds her Christian faith, the way she has managed knowledge that has become glaringly conscious, how she carries grief for the Rob that could have been while celebrating the Rob that is, simultaneously, and how she embraced therapy and was transformed by it.

I will close this case in Stephanie's own words, which I believe reflect the faith she maintains, her past self, who she is presently, and who she continues to become:

> I realized I don't know a lot and so I endeavored to learn more, you know, initially about myself, because I just know that my reaction to everything has a lot to do with who I am, who I was, and who I'm becoming. And I, you know, my ultimate goal is to become the person that God has created me to be. That's my ultimate goal. Because in doing that, I know I can do His work. I can bring Him to light in a more effective way. So that's the

bottom line of my existence. And if I can support my kids, I want to do it as effectively as possible, validating the fact that they are grown and I trust who they are as people.

Chapter V

Discussion

Introduction

Using a Psychoanalytic Case Study methodology (Tolleson, 1996), I conducted a qualitative study to explore the lived experiences of practicing, or formerly practicing, Roman Catholic mothers with an adult child who has disclosed childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. Although this study was open to mothers of children of any sex or gender, all five participants in this sample had male children who were abused by clergy, therefore, masculine pronouns are used to refer to them throughout this chapter. I was particularly interested in the psychological and emotional impacts on the mothers after their sons' disclosure, how the mother's relationship to the Catholic Church and to their faith was affected, the intrapsychic processes each mother used to cope with the disclosure, and whether the disclosure affected the mother's relationship with her son. I was also interested in how any of these factors may have evolved or changed over time since the disclosure. I interviewed five participants two or three times each for approximately four hours of conversation per mother. Chapter four described each participant in detail, along with the categories of meaning that arose from each within-case analysis.

In this chapter, I first provided a brief narrative summary of each case and present further information about each participant and her son in Table 1. Next, I identified broader themes from the participants' categories of meaning and used them to construct a cross-case analysis. Following the cross-case analysis, I treated the predominant psychoanalytic theory that emerged from each category of meaning as, itself, a piece of data, and offered an additional analysis based

on these theoretical patterns. I then offered a section to analyze the negative case of this study in relation to the other participants. Next, I discussed clinical implications, theoretical implications, and research implications. Finally, I offered a conclusion and personal reflection.

Summary of Cases

Below, I provide a brief narrative summary of each case. I highlighted the salient commonalities and differences across the sample. General information about each participant and her son are displayed in Table 1. Despite differences, all five participants shared the experience of being a Catholic, or formerly Catholic, mother who had experienced their son's Catholic clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure.

Case One: Susan

Susan, now in her 60s, was born into and raised in an immersive Catholic environment. She was the only mother who did not identify as white. She left the Church after her son's disclosure, but supported another adult child's decision to raise their own children in the Church. Susan's son, James, was abused at a significantly younger age than the other sons in the sample. He is the only one of the participants' sons who is no longer living.

Case Two: Dorothy

Dorothy is in her 70s. She is the only mother in the sample who chose Catholicism for herself, rather than being Catholic from birth. She is also the only participant who has remained an active, practicing Catholic since her son, Oscar, disclosed that he was abused. Oscar's adult life has been, of all the sons in the sample, seemingly marked by less visible struggle. For these reasons, Dorothy is the single negative case (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) within this sample. As I discuss in a later section of this chapter, negative case analysis is reframed in a Psychoanalytic

Case Study context not as disconfirmation of a generalizable pattern, but as a meaningful divergence from the patterns that emerged in the other four cases.

Case Three: Cara

Cara, in her 80s, is the oldest mother and her son, James, is the oldest son in the sample. Cara was raised in a strictly Catholic environment, but is no longer Catholic since learning of James's abuse. James is the only son in the sample who has a special needs diagnosis, which he has had since early childhood. Cara has been living with the knowledge of the abuse longer than any of the other mothers.

Case Four: Maria

Maria, in her 50s, is the youngest mother and her son, Gabriel, is the youngest son. She was born and raised Catholic, although not as strictly as some of the other participants were. She is no longer Catholic, but she is the only mother who has chosen a new denomination to worship with. She is also the only mother who initially learned of her son's abuse from someone other than her son. The interval between Gabriel's abuse and his disclosure was significantly shorter than that of the other sons.

Case Five: Stephanie

Stephanie, who is in her 60s, was born and raised Catholic, although not as staunchly as some of the other participants. She is the only mother who attended both a Catholic church and a Protestant church before her son, Rob, disclosed his abuse. She no longer participates in organized religion, but she does have a strong, Christian-based faith. Stephanie was the only mother who spoke extensively about her experiences in psychotherapy after her son's disclosure.

Table 1

Demographic and Background Information for Each Participant

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
Name	**Susan**	**Dorothy**	**Cara**	**Maria**	**Stephanie**
Age	60s	70s	80s	50s	60s
Ethnicity or Race	Hispanic	White	White	White	White
Marital Status	Married	Divorced/Single	Divorced/ Re-Married	Married	Married
Location in US	West/Suburban	South/Suburban	West/Suburban	South/Rural	Southwest/ Suburban
Education	Master's Degree	PhD	PhD	Some College	Bachelor's Degree
Catholic Origin	Birth	Chosen	Birth	Birth	Birth
Presently Practicing Catholic	No	Yes	No	No	No
Son	**James**	**Oscar**	**James**	**Gabriel**	**Rob**
Age During Abuse	Early Childhood	Early Adolescence	Mid-Adolescence	Mid-Adolescence	Early Adolescence
First Disclosed to?	Parents/Mother	Girlfriend	Mother	Sibling	Attorney
How Disclosed to Mother?	By Son	By Son	By Son	By Husband	By Son
Years from Abuse to Disclosure	15-20	5-10	15-20	5 or less	20-25
Years Since Disclosure	5-10	25-30	30 or more	5-10	5-10
Son Living?	no	yes	yes	yes	yes

Cross-Case Themes and Analysis

Table 2 displays a summary of the categories of meaning that arose from each participant's data. Table 3 depicts the cross-case themes that were created from groups of the categories of meaning. The five cross-case themes are; structural not-knowing produced by Catholic formation, retrospective reorganization after disclosure, the reconstitution of faith and

institutional belonging, personal transformation, and reconstruction of maternal identity. The themes represent commonalities that operate across, at least, several of the cases. Each cross-case theme illuminates an aspect of the lived experience and meaning making in the specific population that I studied. Further, each theme points to a common psychic process that was elucidated by a sub-group of the categories of meaning. These themes bring to life both the content areas and the psychological operations that are distinct to these Catholic mothers. A narrative analysis of each theme follows the tables below.

Table 2

Categories of Meaning for Each Participant

Case 1	**Case 2**	**Case 3**	**Case 4**	**Case 5**
Susan	**Dorothy**	**Cara**	**Maria**	**Stephanie**
Immersion in Catholicism as Protection	Catholicism as a Choice	Transformation in Coping	Reconstruction of Faith	Distinguishing Faith from the Institution
Living in the Liminal	Remaining Catholic by Splitting	Movement From Not-Knowing to Understanding	Retroactive Reframing of the Church and Danger	Movement From Not-knowing to Understanding
Renegotiated Identity as a Mother	Remaining Catholic by Distinguishing Faith From the Institution	Mastering What Cannot Be Directly Said	Loss of Catholic Community	Maternal Grief and Change in Maternal Identity
Transformation in Understanding	Internal Catholic Identity	Collapse and Reconstruction of the Holding Environment	Tranformation in Compassion	Transformation Through Psychotherapy

Transformation in Agency	Saying What Cannot Be Said Directly	Reconstructed Maternal Identity		
Transformation in Emotional Expression				

Table 3

Cross-Case Themes and Related Categories of Meaning

Theme 1	**Theme 2**	**Theme 3**	**Theme 4**	**Theme 5**
Structural Not-Knowing Produced by Catholic Formation	**Retrospective Reorganization After Disclosure**	**Reconstitution of Faith and Institutional Belonging**	**Personal Psychological Transformation**	**Reconstruction of Maternal Identity**
Susan/ Immersion in Catholicism as Protection	Susan/ Transformation in Understanding	Cara/ Collapse and Reconstruction of the Holding Environment	Susan/ Transformation in Understanding	Susan/ Renegotiated Identity as a Mother
Cara/ Movement From Not-Knowing to Understanding	Dorothy/ Saying What Cannot Be Said Directly	Maria/ Reconstruction of Faith	Susan/ Transformation in Agency	Cara/ Reconstructed Maternal Identity
Maria/ Reconstruction of Faith	Cara/ Movement From Not-Knowing to Understanding	Stephanie/ Distinguishing Faith from the Institution	Susan/ Transformation in Emotional Expression	Stephanie/ Maternal Grief and Change in Maternal Identity
Maria/ Retroactive Reframing of the Church and Danger	Maria/ Retroactive Reframing of the Church and Danger		Cara/ Transformation in Coping	Stephanie/ Transformation Through Psychotherapy

Stephanie/ Movement From Not-Knowing to Understanding	Stephanie/ Movement From Not-Knowing to Understanding		Maria/ Tranformation in Compassion	
			Stephanie/ Transformation Through Psychotherapy	

Theme One: Structural Not-Knowing Produced by Catholic Formation

This theme names what existed structurally, for four of the participants, before their son's disclosure. It draws on both Bollas's (1987) concept of the unthought known and Bion's (1962) concept of -K. I will further develop both of these types of not-knowing, in the context clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, in the theoretical section of this chapter. This cross-case theme illustrates the idea that when one is formed in an immersive Catholic environment, the structure of the Catholic institution prevents one from knowing, or in some cases even suspecting, that clergy-perpetrated abuse is occurring underneath the practices and values of Catholicism.

Susan's case, in particular, illustrates how this total immersion in Catholicism kept the knowledge of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, or even its possibility, outside of awareness. Susan grew up in a large, devoutly Catholic extended family in which priests were regular guests at family dinners, holidays were marked by Catholic practices, and the structure of Catholic life was the structure of life itself. As she stated "I didn't dig my head in the sand, I just didn't know." Susan's words point to a not-knowing that was not defensive, but structural. The fish in the water metaphor is relevant. The fish cannot see the water, that is, what its environment consists of, until it is removed from the water. When one is immersed in Catholic life and priests

are not only part of the family, but also are supported by a religious value system that teaches they are God-like, trust-worthy, and not to be questioned, it becomes nearly impossible to even suspect that they are capable of, much less willing to act on, the desire to sexually abuse children. Susan's not-knowing was not a failure of perception. It was the condition of being inside a structure that did not allow such knowing to form.

Cara, also, experienced a complete immersion in Catholicism from birth that prevented her from thinking of the priest that abused her son as anything other than a friend, helper, and protector. Cara grew up a half a block from her Catholic parish and across the alley from a convent. Her Catholic formation was so complete that she had no available vantage point from anywhere but inside it. When the priest at her son's Catholic high school positioned himself as her partner in caring for him, she received this offer through the immersive Catholic framework that had organized her thinking since childhood, that is, that priests are representatives of God who are there to help, not to harm. Even decades after James's abuse and eventual disclosure, she had difficulty understanding her not-knowing, as evidenced by her statement, "I felt for years, why didn't I know? How did this happen?" Her immersion, like Susan's, was total. She had been taught that priests are representatives of God, and that they are not to be questioned. This structural not-knowing was not something that Cara chose. It was simply what was from the standpoint of a Catholic upbringing.

Although Maria described a Catholic upbringing was not as intense or total as Susan's or Cara's, the Catholicism that she existed in was complete enough that it obscured the possibility that a priest could harm a child. Her Catholic structure was reinforced not only by family and parish life, but by the explicit messages that she heard. For example, her priest's frequent

homilies about the sin of gossiping, the small blue books urging the faithful to pray for priests rather than to criticize them, and the broader framework that taught Catholics to defer to clergy as representatives of God all worked together to keep certain kinds of knowing impossible. Maria said, "And we attended all the Catholic things and did all the right stuff as far as a Catholic goes. Which makes you a good Catholic and you're safe, right? But no." She implies here that she believed that being a good Catholic would protect her from harm. This is not her fault but it is the fault of the institution that perpetrated this type of thinking and inability to know. Again, it is difficult, if not impossible, to see danger lurking from within such a structure. Even though Maria's grandmother had issued a warning to her mother, the structure was so adept at obscuring itself, that the warning was not passed down to Maria. The warning was held within the family, but it was prevented from becoming available to her in a way that would have allowed her to know that a priest could pose danger.

Stephanie's not-knowing due to the structure of the Church presented somewhat differently. It is relevant to mention that her Catholic upbringing was the least stringent of these four participants. Stephanie experienced suspicions that were vague, somewhat buried, and expressions of unthought knowledge that could not be fully brought to consciousness. She had a dream when Rob was a child in which he was abused, and although the dream stayed with her, she could not know what to do with its warning. She had "spidey senses" about the priest who eventually turned out to be Rob's abuser. She asked Rob direct questions over many years, and his denials kept the knowledge from crossing the threshold into full consciousness. The structure of her Catholic formation, while less intense than Susan's, Cara's or Maria's, was still complete enough to organize her relationship to the institutional Church, to clergy, and to trust.

Dorothy's Catholic formation was completely difference in that it was chosen. Her material did not yield a relationship with structural not-knowing in the same way as it did for the other four participants. Dorothy chose Catholicism as an adolescent, when she was further along in developing an adult capacity for thought. Her relationship to the institution of Catholicism carries a dimension of choice that the other participants did not have. The fish in the water metaphor, which describes a structural not-knowing that has always been, does not apply to Dorothy in the same way. I will return to Dorothy's structural distinctiveness in more detail later in this chapter.

Together, the four cases of Susan, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie illustrate that structural not-knowing is not an individual failure of perception or judgment. It is a condition of being formed inside an institution whose structure organized what could and could not be thought or known. The variation in the intensity of the Catholic formation across the cases reflects, to a degree, the individual variation in the participants' not-knowing. However, the structural quality of the not-knowing is common to all of them. Each mother lived inside conditions that obscured the very possibility of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, and each was unable to recognize what was occurring until something outside the structure made the recognition possible.

Theme Two: Retrospective Reorganization After Disclosure

This theme describes the participants' experiences of bringing what was not able to be thought of, or fully thought of, into conscious thought after each mother learned of her son's abuse. The current theme builds on theme one, "Structural Not-Knowing Produced by Catholic Formation," in that the first theme described what existed structurally for most of the participants before their son's disclosure, and the present theme names what each participant did with the

material that became thinkable only after the disclosure. Each participant had to retroactively reassess the past in terms of what she came to know. This theme is anchored in Bollas's concept of the unthought known (1987).

Susan's category of meaning, transformation in understanding, explicitly describes this retrospective reorganization. She moved from "I just didn't know" to a clear view of the institutional structures that blocked her from knowing what they harbored. She described herself as initially naive and believing in the goodness of the Church and of priests. She noted that she started to understand how the structure and belief system of the Church worked to hide and protect predatory priests, "literally after James told us." Susan also acknowledged that she now understands how priests who act as part of the family may actually be grooming both the parents and children as a set up to get away with childhood sexual abuse.

Cara, also, retrospectively, moved from not-knowing to a clear understanding of how the Catholic institutional structure allowed for James's abuse. Cara was taught early on that, as representatives of God, priests were to be respected and not questioned. Thus, there was no way for her to even think that the priest who claimed to want to help her and James could have any ulterior motives. Cara stated this herself, "I looked for help and my background was that the priests are representatives of God and they will help you, and yeah, and I fell right into it." Her not-knowing first began to become thinkable when her friend sent her the article about clergy abuse and became completely thinkable after James disclosed his abuse. At first she blamed herself for the abuse, because she was not completely outside of Catholic structure. Her retrospective and accurate reframing of what had caused the abuse occurred with time and distance from the Church. Cara's participation in survivors' group taught her that she was

groomed and allowed her to move the blame from herself to the Church. She then reframed the abuse from the act of one deviant individual to a institutionally protected and pervasive pattern.

Maria's experience with clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse also caused a retrospective reorganization of her thinking and knowing after her son's disclosure. As she said, "The further back I stand and look in, the less sense it even makes." A significant aspect of her retrospective reorganization included a realization that danger had existed within the Church's institutional structure all along. before this realization, she had thought of danger existing in other places, but not within the Church. After Gabriel's disclosure, Maria came to know that her grandmother had warned her mother about letting a priest put children on his lap. However, this warning was not passed down to Maria until it became thinkable for her. Gabriel's disclosure opened up her ability to think about the Church in negative terms. After learning what had happened to her son, Maria was also able to reframe the content that came from the pulpit, as well as the Church's written teachings. She came to see the frequent homilies about gossip and the book that urged Catholics to pray for priests, rather than criticize them, as mechanisms to reinforce the silencing of suspicions in service of protecting predatory priests. Maria also came to understand that she, as well as other devout Catholic mothers, were specifically targeted and groomed and that their faithfulness is what had made them targets.

Stephanie's retrospective reorganization of what she came to know was based on her realization that the suspicions, or unformulated knowledge, that she had been carrying for decades was indeed knowledge. Her realization is encapsulated in her repeated phrasing of "I knew. I knew." The unformulated knowledge that she carried before Rob's disclosure took various forms. First, she had had a dream that he was abused before it actually happened. She

had “spidey senses” when she thought the disclosure was coming, but Rob’s repeated denials that he was abused kept her suspicions from crossing over into conscious knowledge. The fact that Stephanie was attending services at two different denominations suggests that a part of her realized that she was going to eventually need to leave to Catholic Church. Once Stephanie learned of Rob’s abuse, all these suspicions became thinkable and conscious.

Susan, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie all come to recognize, in retrospect, the structural conditions of their not-knowing. For these four participants, this reorganization of their understanding of the Catholic Church moved them away from Catholicism. Dorothy, too, does some retrospective reorganization through her cleaning out and chainsaw metaphors. For Dorothy, however, this reorganization is about coming to see institutional failure in the Catholic Church more clearly while she continues to choose to remain a practicing Catholic.

Theme Three: Reconstitution of Faith and Institutional Belonging

This theme describes how some of the participants reconstituted their relationship to faith and institutional belonging after their son’s disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. Four of the participants, Susan, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie, moved away from the Catholic Church, although each found a something different to believe in after this movement from Catholicism. Klein’s (1940) depressive position is relevant to this theme as each of these mothers is now holding, simultaneously, the bad of what happened within the institutional Catholic Church and the good of what she decided to continue to hold. Dorothy is the negative case of this theme, as she has remained a practicing Catholic. Her case will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Although none of Susan's individual categories of meaning fit neatly into this theme, her overall experience after James's disclosure is applicable. Susan left the Catholic Church in the wake of James's disclosure, struggles, and eventual death. Despite the fact that the Church was her family's holding environment for generations, she could no longer exist within it. Susan did not explicitly state that she has moved toward another religion or spiritual practice. However, it seems that some of the things that she described, such as being James's voice, her continued love for him, and the small gifts she experiences, the rainbows, hearts and stars, are a spiritual presence in her life that have, perhaps, taken the place of her former Catholic faith. Susan is holding both the bad of what was done to her family by the Church and the good of her present mission.

Cara, also, has left religious institutional belonging behind since her son, James's disclosure. The result is that "I've got a hole inside of me where all that sense of safety was." The Catholic environs that had held her and organized her life was the holding environment in which she developed and the framework through which she made sense of the world. It all collapsed after James's disclosure and she has had to reconstitute a new holding environment for herself. In terms of faith, Cara has embraced a more open type of spirituality, which draws on nature and something perhaps closer to Native American beliefs. Cara lost her Catholic faith, professed the wish to become an atheist, but acknowledged that there is a question mark in her mind, and has compromised by embracing the spiritual. She can now hold, simultaneously, the institutional insidiousness of Catholicism, yet be moved to tears by a St. James altar that she chances upon. Cara's integrative work has made this possible.

Maria is the only participant who found another denominational home in the wake of her reconstitution of faith and institutional belonging. She now worships at a Protestant church. After her arc of transformation, from box-checking Catholicism to a deeper form of Catholicism to a more direct faith in Christ, this church fits her in a more authentic way. The Catholic structure, within which she was formed and in which her faith had been organized around external compliance and institutional belonging, broke down after Gabriel's disclosure to something more interior. The box-checking and Catholic devotion did not keep her family safe. What Maria now holds, simultaneously, is the bad of what the Catholic institution did and the good of her continued faith in Jesus.

Stephanie's reconstitution of faith and institutional belonging is captured perfectly by her statement, "Screw the Church. The Church is not the Savior in all of this. God is the Savior." Stephanie has departed from the Catholic Church and the Protestant church and is no longer participating in any religious institutional life, although she misses it. However, she has not departed from her Christian faith. Her continuing relationship to God and to prayer organize her spiritual life. As Stephanie articulates it, the Church and God are not the same thing and while the Church failed her and her son, God has not. Therefore, Stephanie is able to hold both the bad of what the Church did within its institutional structure and the goodness of her personal faith and belief system. Stephanie's suggestion that she is considering returning, one day, to formal practice points to the thought that her reconstruction of institutional belonging is ongoing.

It is notable that across these four cases, the variation in how each mother reconstitutes faith and institutional belonging seems to reflect, to a degree, the depth of her original Catholic environment. Susan and Cara, whose Catholic upbringings were the most immersive, have

moved most fully away from institutional religion. Maria, whose Catholic formation was less intense than Susan's or Cara's, has moved to another Christian institutional home. Stephanie, whose Catholic upbringing was more similar to Maria's, holds her continuing Christian faith outside any institution and is considering a return to institutional belonging of some type.

Dorothy, who spent her youngest and most formative years outside of the Catholic Church, has remained a practicing Catholic while keeping her eyes open to its weaknesses. This pattern suggests that post-disclosure reconstitution of faith and institutional belonging may be shaped by the depth of the original formation. In this sample, the more thoroughly a mother was formed inside Catholicism, the further away she tended to move away from it in the aftermath of her child's disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. The movement towards holding the bad of the Catholic institution alongside the good of continuing spiritual life or purpose is common to all four, but the form that the integration takes varies with the depth of formation. What each mother has done with the negative of what she has come to know about the Church, and with the positive of what she has continued to hold spiritually, may be shaped by how thoroughly institutional belonging made up the structure of her relationship to faith initially.

Theme Four: Personal Transformation

Another theme that was developed from the categories of meaning was that of personal transformation. Four of the five participants experienced transformation in one or more areas, although the content of the transformation and the manner in which it occurred varied. Of the twenty-four categories of meaning that arose from the sample, six name transformation specifically: Susan's transformation in understanding, agency, and emotional expression, Cara's transformation in coping strategies, Maria's transformation in how and for whom she feels

compassion, and Stephanie's transformation through psychotherapy. Within these categories of transformation, several sub-themes emerge.

First, there is an element of relational transformation for four participants. Susan, with her expanded capacity for emotion, has become more emotionally available to those around her in times of crisis. She no longer needs to be a stoic Jackie O. Maria has become more openly compassionate to those she might previously have judged or avoided, including those whose lives have followed paths she once could not have understood. Stephanie's psychotherapy, which commenced after Rob's disclosure and struggles, transformed her into someone who is no longer codependent and who can step back to allow her loved ones to figure out for themselves how to respond to life challenges. Stephanie described how she has learned to be a good listener rather than a people-pleaser and fixer. Cara was transformed relationally in that she is now more selective about who to let into her life, and she now sees the value in using a community of like others as a source of support. Across these four participants, relational transformation involved a reconsideration of how to engage with the people around them. Each mother found a way of being in relationship with others that is more genuinely her own and less organized around societal, cultural, or religious requirements.

Next, there is an element of transformation in understanding for Susan, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie. Susan moved from a state of structural not-knowing, which was the result of her being immersed in Catholicism since birth, to a clear view of how that immersion had functioned to keep her from knowing what she now knows. She has now educated herself extensively about the structures and practices through which the Catholic Church has both produced and protected predatory clergy, and she now understands the institutional patterns that shaped her family's

vulnerability. Cara moved from years of self-blame to a structural understanding of the conditions that made her and her son vulnerable to the priest's grooming. Through her participation in survivors' groups, she has also come to understand that what happened to James was not a product of failure as a mother, but the result of a systematic process by which predatory clergy targeted devout Catholic parents and their children. Maria moved from box-checking Catholicism to a faith with more depth, and recognized that what once seemed protective had not actually protected her family. Stephanie moved from a position in which her suspicions and dream content could not be brought into thought, to a recognition that she had been carrying knowledge that she was not able to let herself know, through no fault of her own. Across these four participants, this transformation in understanding is demonstrated by the way each brought into thought that what had previously been unthinkable. That which was brought into conscious thought reorganized each mother's relationship to her own past, to the Catholic Church, and to her son.

The third subcategory of the participants' transformation is that of transformation in agency. Susan, after feeling for most of her life that she had to take care of others' problems, has learned to set boundaries and to direct her energy toward her mission as James's voice. Her advocacy work, her refusal to be diminished even in the face of horrific experiences with the Catholic Church, and her capacity to make active and deliberate choices about what to keep and what to let go, all reflect a transformation in agency that seemed to not be available to her before her son's disclosure. Cara, who once imagined herself as protector with a giant eraser who could make others' problems disappear, now has a more realistic sense of what can be erased and what cannot be. Maria used her agency to leave the Catholic Church, to find a new community, and to

advocate in ways she did not before her son's disclosure. Stephanie has used her agency to attend therapy, to step back from her codependent patterns, and to make active choices about how to engage with Rob, with her family, and with her own continuing faith. For these four participants, transformation in agency means taking deliberate action in service of one's own life and one's own value system. Their collective agency is no longer organized around the requirements of the Catholic Church.

Dorothy's categories of meaning, as the negative case, are not organized around transformation, as I will discuss in a later section. In conclusion, Catholic, or formerly practicing Catholic, mothers, in the wake of their child's disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, undergo significant personal transformation across multiple dimensions, including relational stance, understanding, and agency.

Theme Five: Reconstruction of Maternal Identity

This theme describes how four of the participants reconstructed their maternal identity in the wake of their son's disclosure. The conscious knowledge of her son's clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse ruptured the original maternal identity each mother had previously constructed. This theme illustrates how each mother reconstructed that former identity into a form of maternal identity that could encompass what she now knows and what has occurred since her son's disclosure. Winnicott's (1963) concept of going-on-being and Freud's (1917/1957) ideas about mourning are particularly relevant to this theme. The application of these theories to this theme will be developed in the theoretical section of this chapter.

Susan's reconstruction of her identity as James's mother, is captured by her statement, "You better buck up, buttercup, because you've got to keep your son's memory alive." After

James's death, Susan's identity as his mother had to be reorganized around the continued mothering of a son who was no longer alive in parallel with mothering her living children and grandchildren. Susan found a way to keep mothering James through advocacy and the holding of his memory. She has internalized James as a sustaining good object whose presence shapes her daily life and mission, and she has identified with his experience to the point of feeling what he felt, and carrying his despair as her own. Susan refuses to let the mother-child relationship end with James's death, and she has transformed his loss into a continued, spiritual-like presence. This new maternal identity is organized around her purpose of being his voice in a living world in which he no longer has a voice. Susan was, initially, a devoted Catholic mother who was fully engaged in raising her children. This maternal identity later included being a stoic mother who managed his suffering while concealing her own, and has continued to morph, since his death, into a mother whose continued mothering takes the form of advocacy and being his voice. Across these phases, Susan's central commitment to being James's loving mother has remained constant as the form of her mothering has evolved.

Cara's feelings about maternal identity were expressed in her statement, "I didn't protect him and other than somebody actually murdering him, I couldn't think of anything worse." Cara's maternal identity before her son's disclosure was organized around a protector role she had constructed out of her own difficult childhood. Cara had grown up feeling unprotected. The mother who carried James "tucked under my heart" before he was born, who worked two jobs and went to graduate school as a single mother to support him, and who understood her maternal vocation as keeping him safe from all harm, found that she had not been able to protect him from the priest who positioned himself as a guardian. Cara carried grief at having failed in being

James' maternal protector. For Cara, the metamorphosis of maternal identity consisted of a slow relinquishment of her protector identity and movement toward a different maternal stance. This new maternal identity includes walking alongside James and protecting him from what she realistically can, rather than believing that she can protect him from all harm. Cara has come to a more realistic and boundaried sense of what a mother can do. She now recognizes the fact that there are some things a loving mother must bear, rather than protect from. For Cara, the protector mother has given way to a mother who continues to be loving and present without claiming the omnipotent capacity she once organized her maternal identity around.

Stephanie's reconstruction of maternal identity is captured across two of her categories of meaning. Her statement, "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't mourn this," names the ongoing maternal grief that has reorganized her sense of herself as Rob's mother. Her maternal identity, of being a mother to a child whose adult life would unfold without a history of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, has had to be mourned. The mother she has become is a mother whose continued love for Rob includes a recognition that the child he was and the man he could have become were affected by the abuse, and that her relationship with him has been shaped by what was done to him. Stephanie's maternal identity has also been reconstructed by her work in therapy. She has dismantled the codependent and people-fixing maternal stance that organized her mothering of Rob during the years of his struggles, and she has learned to be a good audience rather than a fixer and pleaser. Thus, Stephanie's maternal reconstruction includes both the ongoing mourning of what cannot be undone and the active practice of letting Rob do his own work without taking it over.

Maria's transcripts did not create a category of meaning that was explicitly organized around the reconstruction of her maternal identity in the wake of Gabriel's disclosure. However, her maternal identity reconstruction is woven through all her categories of meaning. Within her case, Maria's maternal identity work is visible across several dimensions. She has continued to lovingly mother Gabriel through his ongoing struggles and she admits that sometimes she is more gentle with him than with her other children. She has, perhaps, reorganized her sense of herself as a mother in light of what she has come to understand about how the institution she once trusted had failed her family. The compassion she has expanded toward others quite possibly includes a reorganized maternal stance, holding both her continuing love and care for her own son and the recognition that her devotion as a Catholic mother had not made her family safe. As I previously wrote, I felt a sense of protectiveness in Maria, in that I felt I did not get to know Gabriel through my conversations with her. Perhaps not speaking freely about him is a change in her mothering of him as the result of his abuse and disclosure. In reference to her experiences after Gabriel's disclosure, Maria told me, "It's changed me in so many different ways," I imagine it has changed her sense of maternal identity as well as the other changes she mentioned.

Dorothy is the negative case for this theme, and it is interesting to note that her son's adult trajectory has not generated the same kinds of demands on her maternal identity that the other four mothers have experienced. The reconstruction of maternal identity that the other four mothers have gone through in response to ongoing maternal grief, ongoing struggles, or premature death has not been required of Dorothy in the same way. Her case is addressed further in a following section.

Across the four cases that support this theme, the variation in how each mother reconstructed her maternal identity seems to be patterned by what her son has needed. Susan's son is no longer alive, and her maternal reconstruction is organized around the continued mothering of a deceased son through advocacy and the preserving of his memory. Cara's son lives with the long-term psychological and physical consequences of his abuse, and her maternal reconstruction is organized around walking alongside him without the omnipotent protector identity she once held. Stephanie's son is doing his own work of recovery, and her maternal reconstruction is organized around being a witness rather than a fixer. Maria's son faces ongoing struggles, and her maternal reconstruction is woven through her broader reorganization of faith, community, compassion, and protectiveness of him. The maternal identities that these four women have reconstructed are shaped by their own psychological work but also by what their sons' lives since their disclosure have needed from them.

Theoretical Elaboration

In keeping with the Psychoanalytic Case Study framing of this project, I employed a psychoanalytic listening stance while interviewing the five participants. Within this stance, I not only listened to the manifest content of what was spoken, but was also attentive to what was conveyed indirectly, through the use of repeated words, seemingly unrelated stories, and reported dreams. Psychoanalysis is interested in such latent content as connected to the unconscious and how it may express intrapsychic processes and defenses.

Likewise, I remained psychoanalytically pluralistic as I used the lens of psychoanalytic theory to inform my understanding of the data that I collected. In remaining open to theory from any psychoanalytic school of thought, I presumed that "A rigid adherence to a singular

theoretical paradigm would be inherently reductionistic and would sorely obstruct [my] efforts to listen open-mindedly to the multiplicity of ways in which experiences and behaviors might contain meaning" (Tolleson, 1996, p. 29). Thus, and in keeping with the stance that everything in a psychoanalytically-informed encounter is grist for the mill, I allowed a psychoanalytic theory to come organically to my mind to anchor each category of meaning and I used this data for further analysis. In this section, I first present this cross-case analysis of theoretical themes. I then elaborate on how the concepts of -K (Bion, 1962) and unthought known (Bollas, 1987) operated at two different levels and further illuminated the experiences of the participants. The discussions in this section develop substantial theoretical observations about Catholic mothers' lived experiences in the wake of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosures.

Cross-Case Analysis of Theoretical Themes

Table 4 displays a primary anchoring psychoanalytic theory for each category of meaning. It is important to note that these particular theories reflect my own analytic listening, training, and sensibilities. In employing a psychoanalytically pluralistic listening stance, a different researcher may have come up with different theories to link to each participant and her categories of meaning.

Table 4

Psychoanalytic Theories for Each Participant's Categories of Meaning

Case 1	**Case 2**	**Case 3**	**Case 4**	**Case 5**
Susan	**Dorothy**	**Cara**	**Maria**	**Stephanie**
Bollas/ Unthought Known	Bollas/ Unthought Known	Bollas/ Unthought Known	Bollas/ Unthought Known	Bollas/ Unthought Known

Klein/ Depressive Position Klein/ Manic Defenses	Klein/ Depressive Position Klein/ Splitting		Klein/ Depressive Position	Klein/ Depressive Position
Bion/ - K Bion/ K			Bion/ - K Bion/ Basic Assumption Mentality	
		Freud/ Mourning Freud/ Sublimation		Freud/ Mourning
Winnicott/ Going-On-Being	Winnicott/ Capacity to Be Alone	Winnicott/ Holding Environment Winnicott/ Transitional Object		Winnicott/ True Self/False Self
	Kohut/ Transformation of Primary Narcissism			

It is striking that Bollas's (1987) concept of the unthought known emerged for all five participants. This intrapsychic idea refers to knowledge that is carried within an individual, for example, in the body, in their behaviors and moods, or in dreams, but that does not exist in conscious thought. For the participants in this study, their sons' disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse propelled the unthought known into conscious thought. I will develop this concept, as created to the participants, further in the next section when I also address Bion's (1962) concept of - K as another form of not-knowing that relates to these mothers.

Next, Klein's (1940) concept of the depressive position emerged for all of the participants except Cara. This suggests that for Susan, Dorothy, Maria, and Stephanie, in the wake of their son's disclosure, movement to the depressive position allowed each of them to live with what they now know. For Klein, the depressive position is initially a developmental achievement that, when reached, allows one the capacity to tolerate ambivalence, to hold an object as having both good and bad parts, and to continue to love someone or something while recognizing that they are imperfect. In the depressive position, one can maintain a relationship without resorting to splitting. Once the depressive position is reached, it requires ongoing work, as traumatic or dysregulating experiences can push an individual back to the paranoid-schizoid position where splitting occurs and objects are seen as all good or all bad.

It is reasonable to believe that their son's disclosure was initially a destabilizing experience that moved each mother into the paranoid-schizoid position in which she split anything in her life that pertained to her Catholic world into good or bad. However, as the inclusion criteria for this study required that each mother had learned of her son's abuse at least a year prior to being interviewed, each mother had a period of time in which to integrate the experience and potentially move back into the depressive position. Further, as an experienced psychotherapist, my feeling was that each mother generally inhabited the depressive position, even while speaking of her son's abuse.

From the categories of meaning that emerged, however, it is apparent that there was variation in what each participant held within the depressive position. Simultaneously, Susan is holding the image of her son as both the beautiful and loving little boy and as the suffering young man. She also holds the devout Catholic family she mothered alongside the family that no

longer practices and is devastated by clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. She stated this position perfectly after she attended Mass for the sake of her grandchildren and said to their parent, "'We raised you this way.' I said, 'Please don't ever apologize for that. Don't. You're not responsible for what happened to your brother…I'm proud of you. I'm proud of what you've done, how you've raised your kids.'"

Dorothy's integrative work shows as she is able to hold both the institutional Church and the Catholic theology she chose together. She recognizes that this institution has produced and protected predatory clergy, but she finds the theology is something that is worth staying for. Maria is consciously holding her expanded compassion alongside the bitterness and anger that she feels, but is not allowing to consume her. She is also simultaneously holding her Christian faith in another denomination as she recognizes that not all churches are bad. Stephanie, similarly, is retaining her faith in God alongside her recognition that the Catholic Church failed her. She refuses to let what happened in the Church cancel her faith.

A comparison of Stephanie, Dorothy, and Maria in regards to the depressive position is quite interesting. All three women are doing depressive position work that involves holding faith and institution together while distinguishing between them. The same psychological operation, which is holding the good and the bad together about something complex, created three distinct outcomes across these three cases. Stephanie's depressive-position work supports her departure from institutional religion entirely while keeping her faith, Dorothy remains within Catholicism with a realistic critique of the institution, and Maria moves to a different Christian institutional home that can hold her continuing faith without the elements of Catholicism that she has left behind. The differences in their outcomes do not reflect differences in the integrative

achievement of the depressive position, but show how the same operation can produce different lived experiences.

Although I experienced Cara as someone who is fully in the depressive position, her material did not generate the concept of the depressive position as a anchoring psychoanalytic theory for any of her categories of meaning. It is possible, as both the oldest participant and as the mother whose son's disclosure is the furthest in the past, that the bulk of her integrative work, as pertaining to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, was worked through long enough ago that it did not surface in our conversations. A comparison with Susan is useful here. Neither Cara or Susan remained within organized religion of any kind. Their experience feels different than Stephanie's, as Stephanie pointed to a continued Christian faith and a possible desire to someday rejoin a denomination. Cara spoke to a broader sense of spirituality, while Susan did not address this topic. Susan's material that was organized around the depressive position did not contain reference to a personal faith or belief system. Susan is in a different life stage than Cara, her son's abuse was disclosed much more recently, and she lost her son, while Cara's son remains living. Susan may not yet be able to work through how she wants to integrate, or not, her faith and religious institutions as she has more pressing areas, such as the death of her son, to process and integrate at this time. Cara has fully relinquished her ties to institutional religion. In contrast, Dorothy's, Maria's, and Stephanie's relationship to faith and institution suggests that the depressive position framing of their experience may apply more fully to those mothers who continue, in some form, to hold a relationship to institutionally based faith.

These observations imply that the the depressive position can be understood as a framework for certain aspects of maternal experience in the wake of clergy-perpetrated sexual

abuse disclosures. It illuminates the work of those mothers who continue to be in relation to the institution that produced and protected the harm, whether that relationship is one of remaining, leaving with continued faith, or moving to another religious home. It does not describe, the experience of mothers whose departure from institutional religion has been complete or for those who are not yet making sense of this.

A variety of Winnicott's ideas arose for all of the participants except for Maria. Different Winnicottian concepts illuminated different aspects of each case. Going-on-being (1963) captured Susan's living work after James's death. The capacity to be alone (1958) captured Dorothy's internal Catholicism. The concept of the holding environment (1960) described the Catholic environment that Cara lost. Winnicott's transitional object (1953) captured Cara's magic coat. For Stephanie, the ideas of the True Self and False Self (1965) captured the way in which she dismantled her people-pleasing and people-fixing maternal stance through her psychotherapy.

The range of Winnicottian concepts that came to life during the interviews with the participants begs a discussion of why Winnicott's ideas might be particularly fitting for this population. Winnicott fundamentally focused on the developmental conditions that allow one to feel truly alive, truly themselves, and to be held by an environment that is attuned to them. The mothers in this study experienced a combination of, a rupture of a trusted holding environment, a disclosure which threatened their going-on-being, the question of what was True Self and what was False Self in their formed Catholic identity, the construction of new transitional objects when old objects, such as Catholic faith and Catholic community, are no longer available, and the experience of being alone after the disclosure. These experiences are all within the ideas that

Winnicott conceptualized. Further, many of Winnicott's theories were based on his work with mothers and infants. This study's focus is, likewise, on maternal experience.

For Maria, however, Winnicott's ideas do not come up as an anchor for any of her categories of meaning. This fact does not necessarily mean that Winnicott's theories do not apply to her experience. It does mean, however, that in using myself as the analytic instrument, and that in listening to her material, other frameworks emerged as more directly applicable. Maria's content, overall, connected more to institutional and group-level dynamics than the others. For example, Bion's basic assumption mentality (1952) was only applied to one of her categories of meaning and to no others. Although some of the other participants spoke of being ostracized by their Catholic communities, it was only for Maria that this became a category of meaning, which suggests that this ostracism and group dynamics may be something that she is currently working through more so than the others were at the time of the research interviews.

A final salient point in this cross-case analysis of theoretical themes connects to the fact that Freud's (1917/1957) concept of mourning anchors categories of meaning for only two of the participants, Cara and Stephanie. It is striking that Freud's idea of mourning, despite the fact that I am quite familiar with his paper describing it and have previously used it in my writing (Sullivan, 2026), did not come up for me for any of Susan's categories of meaning, when Susan is the only mother in this study whose son has died. She is the participant whose grief is presumably the most concrete.

In contrast, Cara and Stephanie are both doing the work of mourning as Freud described it. Cara is mourning a maternal identity. Her lost object is the internal ideal she had of herself as a mother who could protect her son from any and all harm and she is mourning this lost object in

a Freudian sense. Cara's unrealistic maternal identity as omnipotent protector can be slowly relinquished as she comes to a realistic understanding of how she can be a loving and protective mother. She is decathecting an internal ideal rather than an actual person. Similarly, Stephanie is mourning the life she would have had as Rob's mother has he not been abused. Her lost object is also internal and must be slowly decathected as she comes to connect with herself and her relationship with Rob realistically, and in a way that incorporates the fact that he was indeed abused. She is mourning what was taken from Rob and herself by the abuse. As with Cara, Stephanie is mourning an ideal, rather than her actual son.

Susan's son, James, has actually passed away as the result of the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse that he suffered and, yet, I did not free associate to Freud's framework for her, while I did for those mothers who are mourning internal objects and ideals. Instead, I associated to Winnicott's (1963) going-on-being for the category of meaning that comes the closest to James's death. The endpoint of Freud's mourning is a detachment of the libido from the lost object so that it can come to be attached to a new object. This is not what Susan is doing. Instead, she is, in some ways, intensifying the psychic energy that she is attaching to James. She is not letting go of him, but holding him tightly. Susan's continued mothering of James through advocacy and the keeping of his memory is going-on-being as his mother, not the work of mourning that releases the bond to the lost object.

From the above discussion it is apparent that no single theoretical framework, however aptly it fits most of the cases, captures the full range of psychological work that this specific population of mothers does in the wake of a clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure. The psychoanalytic pluralism that was held in analyzing the data of this study has revealed something

about this population. Different mothers do different psychological work, and the theories that illuminate that work vary by what each mother's particular history, Catholic formation, and son's trajectory have called for. The experience of being a Catholic, or formerly Catholic, mother whose son has disclosed clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse cannot be reduced to a single theory or theorist, and the diversity of theories used across the cases reflects the diversity of psychological work that this lived experience produces.

Not-Knowing: - K and Unthought Known

In psychoanalytic thinking, "not-knowing" refers to the condition in which significant material exists for an individual, but is not brought into conscious thought. Different psychoanalytic schools of thought describe the mechanism of not-knowing differently. The theme of not-knowing runs throughout the data that was collected for this Psychoanalytic Case Study. In the theoretical analysis, Bollas's (1987) concept of the unthought known appeared in all five cases and Bion's (1962) - K appeared in two cases. However, - K surfaced as a secondary theory in the cases. Both theories describe distinct phenomena that have to do with obliterating awareness of something intolerable (R. Farrell, personal communication, April 23 2026). In this section, I describe both theories in more detail, apply them to each case, and make the argument that the two concepts together describe, for this sample of Catholic mothers whose sons were sexually abused by Catholic clergy, the relationship between not-knowing of the individual psyche and the not-knowing created by institutional structure. Again, and although there are many psychoanalytic theories that describe not-knowing, unthought known and - K are the two theories that came up in using myself as the analytic instrument while analyzing the data. I also

acknowledge that theoretical application to the lived experiences of actual human beings is never clear cut, and that there is overlap of the mechanisms of not-knowing in each example.

- K

Bion's (1962) - K (minus K) is a psychoanalytic concept that describes a type of not-knowing. It is an active operation of evacuating knowledge, or meaning, and it destroys the capacity for thought rather than allowing thought to form. That is, - K is hostile to thinking and goes against the formation of thought. For Bion, - K is in contrast to K, which is knowing that can be symbolized, thought and expressed.

Although Bion originally framed - K at an individual psychic level, the data collected in this study create the argument that - K operated at the institutional level. That is, this institutional - K occurred at the structural level of the Catholic Church to maintain the conditions in which certain kinds of knowing about clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse could not form. As described below for each participant, - K operated structurally in the Church through its teachings, homilies, books, and beliefs about clerical authority. For some of the participants, there were external events that attempted to penetrate the structure of Catholic - K, but were were not strong enough to accomplish this task. For all of the participants, their son's disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse was ultimately the event that was able to disrupt this structural not-knowing.

For Susan, institutional - K operated through the immersive Catholic structure that had organized her family's life across generations. Priests were constantly present, not just at the parish, but at family events and dinners at home. For Susan and her family, the structure of trust in the clergy was total. A newspaper article with accusations of clergy abuse attempted to disrupt

the not-knowing, but Susan's father's angry response and Susan's acceptance of his explanation kept the structure of - K intact. The institution created the conditions in which questioning, much less accusing, clergy was unthinkable for someone within its structure. Susan stated this perfectly when she said, "I didn't have my head in the sand, I just didn't know."

Cara, also, was formed in an immersive Catholic environment, which included growing up half a block from her parish and attending Catholic schools throughout her formative years. She was trained to so completely trust clergy that when the priest at her son's school positioned himself as someone who would help her and James, she could not have even thought to question him or imagine ulterior motives. The institutional - K had organized conditions such that a priest could position himself as a helper to a struggling mother without it being possible for the mother to think of this as grooming for sexual abuse. The Church's creation of a structure of unquestionable trust in the clergy created a structure of not-knowing that a priest could wish to abuse a child.

Maria described how the structure of - K not-knowing was maintained when she spoke of the homilies that warned of the sin of gossip and the book of Catholic teachings that urged the faithful to pray for priests rather than to criticize them. These structural arrangements of clerical authority organized the conditions in which warnings about clergy were blocked from transmission. Even though Maria's grandmother had given a warning, the structural not-knowing prevented it from reaching across the generations to Maria.

For Stephanie, institutional - K operated through her Catholic upbringing and her later immersion in the Catholic Church as a mother. Catholicism had organized her trust in clergy and what could be questioned. Her husband, also, experienced the structure of - K when he saw the

boy in the private quarters with the priest and did not think to question it until after Rob's disclosure. Stephanie's "spidey senses", her dream, and her direct questions to Rob, were all forms in which the unthought known was finding its way toward thought, but institutional - K maintained the conditions in which the unthought known could not develop into concrete thought. The priest who eventually abused Rob, was a representative of God within the institutional framework. The operation of - K caused Stephanie, despite her intuitions and questions to Rob, to not follow these thoughts further.

Institutional - K operated for Dorothy as it did for the other mothers, but her chosen relationship to Catholicism suggests that it never immersed her as completely. As an adolescent, Dorothy was drawn into an idealized vision of clergy and Catholicism through movies. Institutional - K shaped this image and organized how Catholicism was presented to both Catholics and non-Catholics. Dorothy thus entered Catholicism with some preformed notions about priests and what they represent. Once she was fully inside of the Church, - K operated in such a way that she could not see the danger that a priest could pose to her son.

From this institutional structure of - K, and the individual examples of how each mother experienced it, it is clear that the fish-in-the-water metaphor aptly describes the experience of being inside of Catholic institutional - K. The fish does not notice the water until the water is either contaminated or removed. The fish has no concept of what the water really is because the water is the medium of existence. Catholic mothers within an immersive Catholic environment were inside institutional - K in this way. Thus, institutional - K is the structural level in which the conditions for Catholic not-knowing were maintained. The next section develops the not-

knowing, the unthought known, that each mother carried at both individual and family levels as the result of existing inside of Catholic institutional - K.

Unthought Known

As described previously, the unthought known (Bollas, 1987) refers to knowledge that is held within an individual, but has not been brought to conscious thought or articulated. It may be held in someone's mood, behavior, or manner of relating to others. It also may be held in some form in the body or in dreams. It is a self-state of not-knowing. The unthought known is held in the unconscious and may shape how a person lives and experiences the world, but it is not formulated in thinkable thought. Thus, before it becomes thinkable, the unthought known may emerge indirectly. The unthought known differs from repressed material as repressed material is something that was thinkable but has been pushed into unconsciousness because it was too painful to bear. The unthought known cannot be thought because it either was registered before the individual had the capacity to make it thinkable or because the conditions that are able to make it thinkable do not yet exist.

For the participants in this study, the unthought known names what each mother carried, but could not think until her son's disclosure. The disclosure is what made the unthought known thinkable and the retrospective reorganization that each mother did in the wake of the disclosure is part of the labor of bringing the unthought known into conscious thought. However, for each mother, the unthought known operated differently.

Stephanie's case demonstrates the unthought known the most explicitly. The unthought known operated in several forms in the years before Rob's disclosure. First, Stephanie had a dream while Rob was a child in which he was abused. The dream stayed with her and she was

only able to, at the time, make sense of it as day residue after having watched something on television. Stephanie also had "spidey senses" that something had happened. These "spidey senses" were intuitions that she could not formulate into direct knowledge. She asked Rob direct questions over the years and his denials kept the unthought known from crossing over into actual knowing. Interestingly, and on a behavioral level, Stephanie attended the churches of two denominations during the same time period. She could explain this on a manifest level, but on a latent level, this arrangement makes more sense as an unconscious recognition that something was awry at her original Catholic Church and that she somehow sensed that she would need to find a new place to worship. All of these are examples of the way the unthought known is carried in dreams, intuitions, and behaviors. Rob's disclosure made the unthought known thinkable and Stephanie's statement, "I knew, I knew" is the moment the not-knowing became knowing.

For Susan, the unthought known operated at both an individual and a family level. However, even at the family level, it was distinct from the - K not-knowing that organized the larger Catholic institutional not-knowing. The sense of threat existed in her family environment long before James's disclosure, but could not be fully thought about. When a newspaper ran an article about accusations of clergy abuse, Susan's father became angry and defended the priest. When Susan questioned this, "But what is this?" her father explained it away as something the accusers had made up because the priest had given them bad grades. Susan accepted this and did not questions it further. The unthought known was not able to cross the threshold into think-ability. Susan's in-laws, as she learned later, did not let their own children around the family priest unattended, but they did not warn Susan as they did not believe she would believe them. The knowledge as suspicions was present, in different forms, for multiple members of Susan's

family system. Her father carried it as a defensive anger that shut down questioning. Other family members carried it as a protective wariness. Susan herself had moments in which the unthought known began to surface, particularly in the question she asked her father, but the unthought known did not become thinkable until James's disclosure. Further, the stoicism that organized her emotional life helped keep the points of entry that arose, such as when she she said, "But what is this?" from fully opening. By remaining stoic and logical, she could accept her father's explanation and go no further with her questioning, which kept knowing at bay.

For Cara, the unthought known operated differently. In particular, it contrasted with the manner in which the unthought known operated for Stephanie, which was in the form of a dream and intuitions. For Cara, the unthought known operated in her desire to fully and completely protect James. Cara did not know that she needed to protect him from predatory priests, but something told her that total protection was needed. It was not until James disclosed his abuse that the unthought known became thinkable and Cara understood what he actually needed protection from.

For Maria, the unthought known operated at the family level across generations, in a way that was more similar to how it operated in Susan's family. Maria's grandmother had warned Maria's mother not to let a priest put children on his lap. This priest was a different priest than the one who abused Gabriel decades later, but it demonstrates that the unthought known, that priests are a threat to children, was expressing itself across generations. Maria's grandmother voiced her suspicions, Maria's mother was able to hear it, but the warning did not make it to Maria herself. The unthought known for Maria was the warning her family had been carrying for her in a form she had not been able to receive, through no fault of her own. After Gabriel's

disclosure, when Maria came to learn of her grandmother's warning, the unthought known became thinkable across the generations. This family level operation of the unthought known parallels Susan's experience. In both cases, knowledge was present across multiple members of the family system, but in forms that the mother herself did not have direct access to. Susan's father carried the knowledge as defensive anger that closed off questioning, and her in-laws carried it as a protective wariness that they did not share with her. Maria's grandmother carried the knowledge as an articulated warning that was given to the next generation but not the one after that. The forms of how the family carried the unthought known differed between Susan and Maria, but the structural operation was similar. Knowledge was held in the family, in different forms by different members, that did not become available to the mother whose son was eventually abused.

Although the unthought known operated in Dorothy's case, it was in a different manner than for Stephanie, Susan, Cara, and Maria. Dorothy chose Catholicism as an adolescent, when she was drawn in by romanticized images of Catholicism that she absorbed from *The Song of Bernadette* and other movies. The unthought known was the possibility that the Church could be anything other than the idealized version of it that she believed in. However, Oscar's disclosure brought into thought what her romanticized image of the Church had carried without examining. For Dorothy, however, the process of bringing the unthought known into thought has not been a single event of recognition followed by reorganization. It is an ongoing labor that continues and takes the form of metaphor. Her cleaning out and rhododendron metaphors are the work of making the unthought known speakable. The distinctiveness of Dorothy's case, including the concept of the unthought known, is developed further in a subsequent section of this chapter.

In conclusion and for these Catholic, or formerly Catholic, mothers, Bion's (1962) concept of - K addresses the institutional and structural dimension of not-knowing, or the processes by which the Catholic Church kept certain kinds of knowing impossible. Bollas's (1987) unthought known describes the individual dimension of not-knowing. The two concepts together describe the relationship between institutional structure and individual psyche not-knowing for these participants. In other words, the - K concept applies to thinking that includes distortion, avoidance of thinking, rigidity, denial, refusal to learn, or to contemplate other views. The unthought known is more personal as it is about family relations and what has been communicated even though it was never spoken. It considers what we know but that we do not know we know (I. Sapountzis, personal communication, May 9, 2026).

Discussion of the Negative Case

As described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), negative case analysis is a feature of qualitative research methodology. The negative case is the case that emerges organically as an outlier in comparison to the other cases under study. In grounded theory research, negative case analysis serves the purpose of identifying participants whose data does not fit the pattern that is emerging. The grounded theory researcher then can either modify the pattern to include the negative case or the researcher can accept that the pattern that is coming out of the data is not universally generalizable. In these studies, then, the negative case serves as a check on the generalizability of the findings.

However, Psychoanalytic Case Study research considers negative cases differently. To begin with, Psychoanalytic Case Studies do not claim generalizability, nor do they seek to. This methodology seeks depth, rather than breadth, and its findings emerge from a deep engagement

with subjective lived experiences that do not necessarily extend beyond the sample of participants. Thus, the question of whether the results of the data analysis apply universally is tangential. The relevant question in a Psychoanalytic Case Study is what each case illuminates about the experience under studied. Thus, if a negative case appears in a Psychoanalytic Case Study, it is not a threat to the findings, but an opportunity to more deeply understand the conditions in which the patterns found in the other cases emerged.

As a negative case arises in relation to other cases, it is appropriate to consider the negative case within the cross-case analysis. In this study, Dorothy's experience differed significantly from that of the other participants, which makes her case stand out as the negative case. However, as Desjardins (2022) pointed out, "In no way should the word 'negative' be construed as indicating a value judgement about [Dorothy], [her] perspective, [her] experience, or [her] psychology" (p. 208) nor should Dorothy's decision to remain Catholic "be construed as a developmental arrest or any other kind of pathology" (p. 212). This section will create a portrait of Dorothy's case's structural distinctiveness across the four areas in which her case diverges from the others, and discuss what her case's divergence reveals about cross-case findings.

The first area in which Dorothy's case is distinct lies in the fact that Dorothy was not born and raised Catholic as the other participants were. Susan, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie were "cradle Catholics" and they inherited Catholic before they had any capacity to accept it or refuse it. During their formative years, they never knew anything but the Catholic water that they swam in. Dorothy, however, freely chose Catholicism. Her relationship to Catholicism, both in terms of its theology and institutional presence, has always been chosen rather than inherited. The

condition that produced the deepest forms of not-knowing in the other four mothers was the institutional - K that immersed them completely from infancy. This factor had less influence on Dorothy because her Catholic formation began later and was filtered through a more mature mind.

The second area in which Dorothy's case diverges sits in the fact that Dorothy uses the depressive position to continue to be Catholic while Susan, Maria, and Stephanie use the depressive position to depart from Catholicism. The depressive position anchors a category of meaning for all four, in that all four hold the tension between the failure of institutional Catholicism, and the benefit of maintaining a continued belief system. For Susan, this is a belief in leaving the Church and carrying on her mission to help others who suffer as her son suffered. For Maria and Stephanie, it is leaving the the Church for another Christian denomination or to hold a personal Christian faith. Even Cara, for whom the depressive position did not anchor a category of meaning, leaves the Church, but holds on to the importance of spirituality. For Dorothy, however, the integrative work of the depressive position supports a different outcome. She stays within practicing Catholicism while also being able to critique the institution and see it for what it is.

Third, Dorothy's unthought known experience differs from that of the other participants. For the other mothers, the unthought known was carried until each son's disclosure. The disclosure brought the unthought known into conscious thought when the disclosure interrupted the institutional - K. Each of these mothers experienced a retrospective reorganization, in various respects, that happened over time after the disclosure. In each of these cases, this shift was anchored by the disclosure event. However, Dorothy's unthought known work presented

differently. Oscar's disclosure certainly opened her eyes, but all of her unconscious thoughts and feelings at the Church are still gradually working their way into conscious thought, as evidenced by her use of metaphor as we spoke. For the other participants, there was a single event of recognition followed by a reorganization. For Dorothy, the cleaning out and rhododendron metaphors show an ongoing process and this process is occurring within her continued belonging to the Church. Again, this is not a deficit, but perhaps, the form the process takes for a mother who has chosen to remain inside of the institution that she is processing.

Fourth, Dorothy's maternal identity has had different demands than those of the other mothers. Susan, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie have experienced a reconfiguration of their maternal identities in response to what their son's lives have required since their disclosure. Victims of childhood sexual abuse often have different outcomes, which can be not entirely explicable, rather than about strength, family supports, or resources. Susan's son died as the result of his abuse. Cara's son lives with the long-term consequences of his abuse, which are both physical and psychological. Maria's son faces ongoing struggles, as has Stephanie's son. The reconstruction of each of their maternal identities have been shaped by their son's needs. Dorothy's son has faced significantly fewer challenges since his abuse and disclosure. Thus, the maternal demands on Dorothy have been different. She has not had to mother Oscar through the kinds of crises that the other four mothers have had to mother their sons through. Her case does not have an explicit maternal identity reconstruction category of meaning because the demands that produced such reconstruction in the other cases have not been present in her life.

Finally, it is apparent that Dorothy's divergence as the negative case reveals more than the cross-case analysis would without her case. First, it shows that the cross-case findings about

the participants' experience apply most directly to mothers who have been Catholic since birth. Next, the integrative work of holding the good and the bad of the Church and religious beliefs simultaneously does not have a singular outcome. This capacity may have various outcomes, including remaining within the Catholic Church after a child discloses clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. The unthought known work looks different depending on whether the mother has departed from the institution or remained within it. The cross-case findings about retrospective reorganization apply most directly to mothers for whom the disclosure brought what was not known into knowing and who then left the Church. Retrospective reorganization may be ongoing for mothers who make the choice to remain practicing Catholics. Finally, there is a variation in maternal identity reconstruction depending on what the son's trajectory has required of the mother. The cross-case findings about maternal identity reconstruction apply to mothers whose sons' post-disclosure trajectories created greater demands on maternal identity. They apply less directly to mothers whose sons' outcomes did not generate the same demands.

The negative case, thus, illuminates the conditions under which the cross-case findings hold. The cross-case findings are more directly applicable to birth Catholic mothers who leave Catholicism after their son's disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse and whose sons' lives have generated more maternal needs. The cross-case findings apply less directly to mothers who became Catholic by choice, who remained Catholic after their son's disclosure, and whose sons have faced fewer challenges after their abuse and disclosure.

Implications

The findings of this Psychoanalytic Case Study, particularly its cross-case themes, have implications for mental health clinicians, researchers, psychoanalytic theorists, and others who

are interested in or intersect with the subject of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. As previously discussed, this study was not designed with the goal of generalizable findings. The clinical, theoretical, and research implications, as discussed below, are meant to serve as a guide for further understanding the subjective experiences and needs of Catholic mothers whose adult child or children disclose childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Clinical Implications

Although the five participants shared a very particular experience, it is important to keep in mind that they are all individuals with their own subjectivities, and despite the cross-case commonalities, no clinician should ever assume that a Catholic mother who presents for treatment will necessarily be similar to any of the study participants in terms of thoughts, feelings, or reactions to their child's clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure. Participants who were willing to volunteer for this study may also have a different trajectory than an individual who presents for treatment, but who would not be willing to participate in such a study. With that said, the data from these five cases point to a number of considerations for clinicians working with this population.

First, clinicians working with Catholic mothers in the wake of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse should have a working knowledge of Catholicism's belief system. The concept of a*lter Christus* is both unique and central to Catholic beliefs, and clinicians need to comprehend how, for a devout Catholic, questioning a priest is akin to questioning God himself (Doyle, 2003). For a Catholic who was raised in an immersive Catholic environment, the idea of not trusting a priest is nearly incomprehensible. This is not the mother being naive, but it is how she has related to the clergy since childhood.

Clinicians should understand that Catholic identity may organize a Catholic's entire life and sense of self. A patient who seeks treatment in the wake of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse may be reorganizing her entire sense of self, and the therapist should realize that Catholic identity is not something to argue against or analyze as a set of defenses. The patient's sense of belonging, trust, and meaning has most likely been formed by her Catholic environment. The patient may not have been able to even consider her Catholic environment with an observing ego until the disclosure ruptured the immersion. The fish-in-the-water formulation is helpful to keep in mind.

Within this understanding, clinicians should also explore the origin of the patient's Catholic formation, particularly whether she was born into a Catholic family or chose Catholicism later in life. Her religious origin may be a significant factor in her post-disclosure trajectory. The mothers in this study who were born into Catholicism, Susan, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie, each moved away from it following their sons' disclosures. The fifth mother, Dorothy, chose Catholicism as an adolescent and has remained with it since her son's disclosure. Her post-disclosure trajectory has been correspondingly different.

There is a wide range of trajectories in terms of how a Catholic mother reconstitutes her faith and institutional belonging after her child's disclosure. She may reject either or both. The patient may also find a middle path, in which some elements of her faith and institution are retained while the elements she feels are tainted are discarded. The variation across the five study participants reflects the variation a clinician should expect to see in this population. In a clinical sense, it may be helpful to reinforce the idea that the Catholic mother does not have to consider faith and institution in all or nothing terms, and that she can find solace in a belief system and

practice of her own making. Further, the clinician's task is to support the patient's integrative work rather than to direct it toward a particular outcome. A clinician who is critical of the Catholic Church may struggle to support a patient who chooses to remain within it. A clinician who is a devout practicing Catholic may struggle to support patients like Susan or Cara who have departed entirely. It would be helpful if the clinician supports the mother in retaining whatever elements of her faith she finds sustaining without feeling judged or shamed for doing so.

Mental health clinicians also need to consider that a Catholic patient who was not aware of her child's abuse, or the potential for it, may be helped by understanding the structural conditions of not-knowing that existed. A patient who says she did not know was not necessarily in denial, but is naming her experience accurately. Institutional - K actively organized the conditions in which knowledge of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse could not form. In understanding this structure, the mother may be able to mitigate any blame or guilt she feels for not preventing her child's abuse.

The grief these mothers carry is layered, and it is important for clinicians to realize this. A mother may be grieving on several levels simultaneously, or she may mourn different losses at different times. A mother may be literally mourning a child who died as the result of the abuse or she may may grieving what her child's life might have looked like had he not been abused. She may be grieving a former idealized maternal identity or her former Catholic identity. On a broader level, she may be grieving a lost Catholic community or a lost sense of belonging to the Catholic institution.

Therapists working with this population clinically should remain aware of their counter-transferential responses, which are often complex when working with patients who have

experienced the trauma of betrayal. The therapist may feel protective of the mother in this situation. The therapist may also share in the mother's grief or in her perceived failings as a mother. The clinician may also feel anger and complex feelings toward the Catholic Church and Catholic clergy. The therapist needs to be clear about any unprocessed thoughts or feelings that they have about their own relationship with Catholicism, or organized religion in general, whether they are a practicing Catholic, have abandoned Catholicism, or have never been Catholic. In this regard, the clinician should be cautious of the ways that their own relationship to Catholicism may shape what they hear, emphasize, or allow to remain implicit in the consulting room. The therapist's task is to support the patient's own integrative work rather than to direct it toward a particular outcome. In working with these mothers, as in working with all populations, a psychotherapist should seek consultation as needed and their own ongoing treatment to process what arises in their work with Catholic mothers with a child or children who have experienced clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Theoretical Implications

In this section, I discuss the theoretical implications that emerged from the within case findings and the cross-case analysis. First, Bion's (1962) - K and Bollas's (1987) unthought known reveal two different levels of not-knowing that pertain to the mothers of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse victims. Bion developed the concept of - K as an operation of evacuating knowing, which destroys the capacity for thought and knowing. This is in contrast to the mechanism towards knowing, or K, when unmetabolized elements are transformed, via alpha function, into elements that can be fully thought. Bollas developed the concept of the unthought known as knowledge held in the body, moods, behaviors, dreams, and patterns of relating, that

has not been brought into conscious thought. These two concepts have been placed in conversation in the existing literature primarily as related concepts about how thought becomes possible from raw experience (Jaron, 2021), with Bollas himself noting that the unthought known is knowledge that has not been subjected to Bion's alpha function (Bollas, 1987).

In the context of this study, institutional - K and the unthought known allow the analysis of two distinct levels of not-knowing in the experiences of Catholic mothers whose child disclosures clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. The institutional - K describes what the Catholic Church was doing at the structural level to keep certain kinds of knowing impossible, such as the teaching of clerical authority to position priests as representatives of God whose authority can not be challenged. This is an institutional operation that maintained the conditions for the Catholic mother's not-knowing of widespread clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse in the Church.

The unthought known describes the unconscious carrying of knowledge of the Church's insidiousness at the individual and family-system levels. For example, Maria's grandmother's warning existed in the family but did not cross the generations into Maria's direct awareness. Stephanie's dream of Rob's abuse was held in dream form until his disclosure made it thinkable. These mothers were not actively destroying the formation of thought at the individual level. They were carrying what the institutional - K had structured them to be unable to think.

The fish-in-the-water metaphor, illustrates the experience of being inside institutional - K. The fish does not notice the water until the water is contaminated. The Catholic mother does not notice institutional - K until something from the outside interrupts it. The disclosure of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse is the event that, in each of the five cases, interrupted the institutional

- K from the outside. Once it was interrupted, the unthought known became thinkable at the individual and family levels. The implication, for this phenomenon, is that - K and the unthought known should not be collapsed into one. They illuminate two different levels of analysis of not-knowing in the milieu of Catholic clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse.

The five cases in this study suggest that a variety of psychoanalytic theories may be applied to their circumstances. These theories range from those of Freud, to Klein, Winnicott, Bion, Kohut, and Bollas. No single theoretical framework, however well it fits some of the cases, captures the full range of these mothers' experiences. The theories used in this study also reflect, in part, the researcher's own psychoanalytic sensibilities and listening. Other researchers, perhaps with different theoretical training, may have elucidated different theoretical frameworks from the same sample of participants. This idea is consistent with the methodology of Psychoanalytic Case Study research, which accepts that the researcher is the instrument of interpretation and that experience is subjective. The theoretical implication is that the experience of being a Catholic mother in the wake of a clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse disclosure cannot be reduced to a single theoretical narrative, and future study and theoretical analysis of this population needs theoretical frameworks that can hold multiplicity rather than reducing the experience to a single psychoanalytic narrative.

Research Implications

This study explored five research questions concerning the lived experiences of Catholic mothers whose adult children disclosed childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. In this section, I first evaluate the appropriateness of the study design for these questions. I then identify areas for further inquiry.

This qualitative Psychoanalytic Case Study method served the research questions of this study well. The first research question was concerned with the psychological and emotional impacts on mothers after their adult children's disclosures. The study design of multiple interviews with each participant and psychoanalytic attention to both manifest and latent content and process, allowed the psychological and emotional impacts to be explored. The mothers' material spoke not only to immediate emotional responses but to the ongoing psychological work that has unfolded since disclosure.

The second question explored the mothers' relationships to the Catholic Church after disclosure. The within case analysis allowed each participant's particular trajectory to emerge before it was placed in relation to the others' trajectories through the cross-case analysis. The variation across the five cases, ranging from departure from institutional religion to continued Catholicism, was well captured.

The third question asked about the positive and negative effects on the mother-child relationship. This study's stance enabled attention to the complex ways that this relationship may be reorganized after disclosure, including how each mother has continued to mother her son in the years since his disclosure. The shifts in how the mothers understand themselves as mothers, in particular, was illuminated.

The fourth and fifth research questions addressed the intrapsychic processes the mothers used to cope with disclosure, and how their meaning-making evolved over time. These questions were particularly well served by the Psychoanalytic Case Study method, which is specifically attuned to unconscious processes and to the work of psychological process across time. The

theoretical frameworks that emerged during the analysis further allowed the intrapsychic dimensions of each mother's experience to be illuminated.

This study points to several areas for further research. A significant area would be research that includes a more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse sample of Catholic mothers. The participants in the present study were predominantly white, with one participant who identified as Hispanic. The experience of being a Catholic mother in the wake of a child's clergy abuse disclosure may be different for women of color, for women from cultural backgrounds in which Catholicism is embedded differently, and for women whose racial or ethnic identities intersect with their Catholic formation in ways that differ from the participants in this study. In particular, the experiences of Black Catholic mothers, and of Catholic mothers from immigrant communities for whom the Church has provided a feeling of cultural belonging as well as religious belonging, need attention.

Cultural considerations also extend to geography and to the specific Catholic communities within which mothers grew up or became Catholic. The participants in this study come from different regions of the United States, but each was formed within American Catholicism. The experience of Catholic mothers in other national contexts, where the institutional Church operates differently and where the cultural meaning of clergy abuse may be configured differently, would be illuminated by additional research. Mothers in Ireland, Latin America, the Philippines, and other nations with strong Catholic cultures may have had different experiences that a study focused on American participants cannot capture.

This study focused on a population that has been nearly absent from the literature on clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. Catholic mothers are themselves a marginalized voice within

this conversation, which has appropriately centered on direct victims and the institutional structures that have produced and protected such abuse. Future research that continues to bring maternal experience into the literature on clergy-perpetrated abuse and that is cautious not to displace victim experience or to use maternal narratives in ways that would minimize the harm done to the victims themselves, is needed.

The participants in this study were self-selected, as they responded to my recruitment outreach through survivor advocacy networks and other means. The mothers who participated in this study may differ in important ways from mothers who would not have been willing to participate. Future research that finds ways to reach these mothers without violating their privacy or autonomy would extend the understanding of this population.

Other aspects of these participants' experience call for further research. The experience of mothers whose children do not survive their abuse deserves attention. Susan is the only such mother in this study, and her case alone cannot speak to the broader experience of mothers whose children have died in the wake of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. This study inadvertently studied mothers with sons who had been abused by clergy. Research is need about mothers of daughters who have been abused by clergy. This study excluded mothers who had their own history with clergy abuse, which could serve as another area of inquiry. Finally, this study has focused exclusively on mothers. Fathers, siblings, and other family members of clergy abuse victims may have experiences that differ from those of mothers. Research that addresses the experiences of fathers, both individually and in comparison to mothers, and that addresses siblings and extended family systems would broaden the understanding of how clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse affects families relations across several generations.

Conclusion

This is Not Over

Although it is not reflected in the participants' quotes, the categories of meaning, and the broader themes that arose from the analysis of the data, each of the participants mentioned and discussed with me their feeling that the Catholic clergy abuse crisis is long from over and I agree. This crisis has been made public and the Church seems to be taking measures to protect both children and adults from predatory priests, but there is the very real concern that clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse will simply become more difficult to detect. If the Church chooses to continue to protect clergy-predators, it may find more covert means to do so.

As of this writing, in May of 2026, a search of recent news articles made it clear that the institutional crisis that this study is addressing is most definitely not over, but is continuing in real time. In March 2026, the Rhode Island Attorney General released a 282-page report that identified 75 members of the clergy who were credibly accused of sexual misconduct against children. This report documented decades of cover-up by the Diocese of Providence and revealed that the majority of complaints received between 1950 and the early 2000s were not referred to law enforcement (Rhode Island Office of the Attorney General, 2026). This month, the Rhode Island Senate began to consider a resolution asking the state Supreme Court whether it would be constitutional to revive previously expired civil claims, and open a window for these claims beginning July 1, 2026 (Shea, 2026). The Archdiocese of New York proposed an $800 million settlement in April 2026 to resolve approximately 1,300 claims made possible by New York's Child Victims Act (CBS New York, 2026).

As of April 2026, the Catholic Church in the United States had paid over $5 billion in clergy sexual abuse settlements and legal fees (Sokolove Law, 2026). New state attorney general investigations continue to release findings. New criminal cases continue, and they include cases against priests who have sexually exploited adult Catholic women within the uneven power differential of priest and congregant. This expands the recognized scope of clergy-perpetrated abuse beyond child sexual abuse alone. Pope Leo XIV, elected in 2025, has met with survivors and survivor advocacy groups in ways that depart from earlier papal practice, stating in early 2026 that the door of the Church had been "closed and the victims were not welcomed" and that the Church "cannot close our eyes nor our hearts." (Guzik, 2026) It is my hope that he is sincere and that real action will follow his words.

The mothers in this study, Susan, Dorothy, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie, shared their stories with me during a time when more information continues to come forward, more abuses and cover-ups are being documented, and more cases are being prosecuted. There is plenty more to reckon with. The disclosures that the sons of these five participants made are not isolated events. Their clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse was part of a pattern that the Catholic Church is still being pressed to confront. The research I have presented in this dissertation contributes to a literature that, like the crisis it addresses, is still being written.

My Journey

Since the moment I began my doctoral studies, I did not waver in my choice of this topic for my dissertation research. This subject was motivated by my clinical work with patients who have been either directly or indirectly affected by clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. My own Catholic upbringing certainly plays into this choice as well.

My clinical office is situated next to a large Catholic Church with a shared parking lot. As I come and go, I often see groups of young mothers who are dropping off or picking up their children from the parish school. I witness older women, who I imagine to be grandmothers, standing outside the church after a morning weekday Mass, chatting with each other and slowly making their way back to their cars. Sometimes there are funerals, and I see groups of mourners going into this church. I always think about clergy abuse in these moments of witness, and I wonder how many of these practicing Catholics have been touched by this insidious experience, whether or not they are aware of it. I always feel anger in these moments, and I have had the desire to shout an angry comment out loud or to post the recruitment flyer for this study all around the church grounds. I have resisted these aggressive impulses, thankfully, and instead I've channeled them into something more useful and the result is this study. Thank goodness for sublimation.

Recruitment for this project was understandably quite difficult, but I persisted. As a result I met, through both phone calls and email exchanges, a most wonderful group of people who are connected to the clergy abuse crisis. They were generous with their time, pointed me towards possible resources, and were happy to allow me to use their names in reaching out to those they connected me to. I viscerally felt their trust, support, and appreciation for this study. Everyone I communicated with is doing their own work for those affected by clergy abuse, and this reminds me that my research connects to something much larger than this specific topic.

It is not lost on me that I began drafting this section over Mothers' Day weekend 2026. Susan, Dorothy, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie are five of the strongest and most resilient mothers I have ever met and my fantasy is that each had exactly the Mothers' Day that she desired. I am

thinking of each woman right now, with her actual name, face, and the sound of her voice. I am certain that they all will continue to mother their sons just as each needs and I hope they will take care of themselves also. Painful experience wears down the body, the mind, and the spirit, but as each mother showed me, it also can be transformative in a positive way. I wish that clergy-perpetrated abuse had not been the source of their positive transformations. As I read and reread their transcripts over and over again, I was touched by their pain, their wisdom, and their strength. Many of the quotes that I used, Susan, Dorothy, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie's exact words, are so beautiful that they move me to tears.

To Susan, Dorothy, Cara, Maria, and Stephanie, while the work of this study is now finished, I know that your journeys continue beyond the boundaries of this dissertation. I am grateful for your time, trust, and vulnerability. It was difficult to say goodbye to each of you and I know that I will think of you often in the days and years going forward. I hope I have done you justice. Godspeed.

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Research Study:
Catholic Mothers Needed

If you are the mother of an adult child who has disclosed that he or she was sexually abused, during his or her childhood, by Catholic clergy, I would like to learn about your experience for my dissertation research.

My name is Elizabeth B. Sullivan, LCSW-R.
I am a PhD candidate at the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago.

If you are interested in participating in this research, or would like to know more about my study, please call, text or email me at:

516-712-4919 (private office cell)
esullivan@icsw.edu (email)

All inquires are completely confidential and all participant's identities will remain anonymous.

Eligibility:

- Mother, age 21 or older
- Present or Former Practicing Catholic
- Disclosure of your child's abuse occurred over one year ago
- English-speaking

Study Requirements:

- Initial short screening phone call
- 2 or 3 audio recorded interviews lasting between 60-90 minutes either in-person or by HIPAA-compliant (confidential) video call
- Willingness to discuss your experience of learning your adult child was abused by clergy during childhood

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and there is no cost to you except your time and travel (if you prefer an in-person interview)

This study is being conducted by doctoral candidate Elizabeth B. Sullivan, LCSW-R (principal investigator), supervised by Jennifer Tolleson, PhD (dissertation chair), and under the auspices of the Institute for Clinical Social Work, 1345 W. Argyle Street, Chicago IL 60640

Catholic Clergy Abuse Study

Appendix B

Solicitation Email

Dear [Name].

My name is Elizabeth B. Sullivan, LCSW-R and I am a PhD candidate at the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago, IL.

My dissertation study will be an exploration of the experiences of Catholic mothers with a adult child who has disclosed that they were sexually abused by Catholic clergy during their childhood. Using a qualitative psychoanalytic case study method, I hope to understand how these mothers have understood and navigated this experience and how this experience of discloser may have changed their relationship to themselves, their families and to the Catholic Church.

Under the auspices of my dissertation chair, Jennifer Tolleson, PhD, I am hoping to conduct 2-3 individual interviews of 60-90 minutes with at least 5 Catholic mothers. These participants must:

- be a female and age 21 or older
- be a present or former practicing Catholic
- be English speaking
- have learned of their adult child's abuse over one year ago

I am wondering if you would be able to connect me to any potential participants or individuals/ organizations that may be able to collaborate with me in finding participants.

Please let me know your thoughts at your convenience- I thank you in advance and look forward to hearing from you!

All the Best,
Elizabeth B. Sullivan LCSW-R

esullivan@icsw.edu
516-712-4919 (private office cell)

Appendix C

Scripted Response to Inquiries for Email

Hi [Name],

Thank you for reaching out and being interested in my research.

I would like to schedule a short phone call with you to answer any questions or concerns and to see if you qualify for my study.

I want to make you feel as comfortable as possible when we speak, so please know that this phone call does not obligate you in any way. Anything we talk about will be kept completely confidential and anonymous whether or not you decide to participate in my study.

Please respond with your availability in the next few days and I will confirm a time to speak.

I thank you in advance and look forward to hearing back from you!

All the Best,
Elizabeth B. Sullivan LCSW-R

esullivan@icsw.edu
516-712-4919 (private office cell)

Appendix D

Screening Interview Script

Hi, I'm Elizabeth Sullivan and I am a doctoral student at the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago. I am conducting a study for my dissertation, which is part of the requirements for my PhD. The goal of my research is to learn about the experiences of Catholic mothers who have learned that one or more of their adult children were sexually abused by clergy while they were growing up. I hope that my study will add to the body of knowledge about this topic and will aid mental health clinicians in working with people who have gone through this experience. I will keep the identities of anyone who participates in my study confidential.

I'll give you more information, but so far, does this study sound like something you would be interested in participating in?

[if no]: I understand and thanks for considering it. Goodbye.

[if yes]: Great. Thank you. Now I need to ask you a few short questions to confirm you are eligible to participate. Your answers to these questions will be kept confidential.

1. Are you 21 or older? [yes=eligible]
2. Do you speak English fluently? [yes=eligible]
3. Were you born female and are you a mother? [yes=eligible]
4. Are you a practicing Roman Catholic now or were you? By practicing Catholic, I mean that you received your sacraments; Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation and you had your child receive these sacraments. This also means that you went to Mass and/or brought your child to Mass at least half the time and on most Holy Days of Obligation. [yes=eligible]
5. Has it been at least a year since you found out about the abuse? [yes=eligible]
6. Have you ever been sexually abused by clergy or had a consensual sexual relationship with a member of the clergy? [no=eligible]

7. And finally, are you willing to be interviewed either 2 or 3 times for at least 60 minutes, either in-person or over a confidential video platform and be audio recorded? [yes=eligible]

[if not eligible]: I'm sorry, you do not seem to be eligible for this study. Can I answer any questions before we say goodbye?

[if eligible]: Great, you meet the criteria for participation. The next step is to schedule our first interview. I also have an informed consent form for you to read and sign, which I can either email or mail to you today. During our first meeting, we will review the informed consent together so that I am certain it all makes sense to you. I will also ask you for some basic demographic information and then we will start the interview. Does that sound ok? Do you have any questions or concerns right now?
[if yes]: Continue, answer questions, and schedule first interview
[if no]: End this conversation and schedule first interview

Thank you so much for reaching out and speaking with me today. I really appreciate your time and your willingness to be a part of my research.

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Institute for Clinical Social Work

Research Information and Consent for Participation is Social Behavioral Research

The Lived Experience of Catholic Mothers in the Wake of a Unique Betrayal:

A Psychoanalytic Case Study

I,_____, acting for myself, agree to take part in the research entitled: **The Lived Experience of Catholic Mothers in the Wake of a Unique Betrayal: A Psychoanalytic Case Study.**

This work will be carried out by Elizabeth B. Sullivan, LCSW-R under the supervision of Jennifer Tolleson, PhD.

This work is being conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Clinical Social Work; At St. Augustine College, 1345 W. Argyle St., Chicago, IL 60640; (773)935-6500.

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation research is to understand and describe the experiences of Catholic mothers who have learned that their adult child or children experienced childhood clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. The results of the study will be used to expand clinical social work practice and theory that relates to these experiences.

The dissertation written from this research will be available online once it is completed. The research findings may be used in the future for a journal article, book, or conference presentation.

Procedures used in the study and duration

Participants will be asked to participate in either in-person or virtual face-to-face in-depth interviews that are both semi-structured, with open-ended questions that lead to discussion, and flexible, which may lead to spontaneous discussion. Two or three 60 to 90 minute interviews are required. Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and all recordings/audiotapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed. All data from these interviews will be secured with passcodes and stored in locked filing cabinets in a locked office.

Benefits
While there will be no tangible or financial benefits for participating in this study, participants may benefit in other ways. These possible intangible benefits include increased self-awareness and insights related to the experiences they share. Participants' experiences will likely expand clinical social work theory and therapeutic interventions for mental health clinicians and others who work with those who have had similar experiences.

Costs
The cost for participation is 3 to 5 hours of total time for the interviews and any expenses incurred in traveling to an interview location, such as gas or parking fees.

Possible Risks and/or Side Effects
The risks of participating in this study involve the possibility of psychological discomfort or experiencing negative emotions either while you are discussing your experiences or afterward, while you are thinking about them. For example, you may feel upset, anxious, vulnerable or angry. I, the researcher, will make every effort to create a safe and comfortable interview setting.

However, if these feelings surface, you have the following rights throughout the study:

- The right to take a break from the interview
- The right to refuse to answer any of the questions without giving a reason
- The right to withdraw from this research project at any time

If you experience any uncomfortable feelings during the interviews or after, please let me know. I am happy to connect you to mental health resources that may be helpful.

Privacy and Confidentiality
Your privacy and confidentiality is a priority and will be protected. Any identifying information, such as name or specific locations will be disguised. I will use an alias of your choosing, or assign one to you if you prefer, when writing about my study. Each interview will be audiotaped and transcribed and the files will be shared only with my dissertation committee chairperson, Jennifer Tolleson, PhD. All electronic files will be password protected and kept on a private passcode protected computer in my private professional office. All physical files will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my locked private professional office. Only I, the primary investigator, will have access to to these materials. Five years after my PhD is conferred, I will destroy all by shredding paper records and permanently deleting all electronic records.

Subject Assurances
By signing this consent form, you agree to take part in this study. You have not given up any of your rights or released this institution from responsibility for carelessness by signing.

You may cancel my consent and refuse to continue in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. Your relationship with the staff of ICSW will not be affected in any way, now or in the future, if you refuse to take part, or if you begin the study and then withdraw.

If you have any questions about the research methods, you can contact Elizabeth B. Sullivan LCSW-R at 516-712-4919 or esullivan@icsw.edu or Jennifer Tolleson PhD at 312-342-3184 or jtolleson@icsw.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Dr. John Ridings, Chair of Institutional Review Board; the Institute for Clinical Social Work; At St. Augustine College, 1345 W. Argyle St., Chicago, IL 60640; (773)935-6500.; irbchair@icsw.edu.

Signatures

For the Participant

I have read this consent form and I agree to take part in this study as it is explained in this consent form:

Participant Name (please print): _____

Participant Signature:_____ Date: _____

1. Would you like a summary of the results of this study?

Yes: ____

No: ____

For the Primary Researcher

I certify that I have explained the research to _____ and believe that they understand and that they have agreed to participate freely. I agree to answer any additional questions when they arise during the research or afterward.

Researcher Name (please print): _____

Researcher Signature:_____ Date: _____

Appendix F

Script for Informed Consent Review

Prior to beginning the initial interview, a comprehensive informed consent discussion will take place. This conversation will address:

1. The purpose of the study
2. Rationale and potential scholarly contributions
3. Participant responsibilities and commitments
4. How the data will be collected
5. Potential benefits and risks
6. Confidentiality protections and data security

Participants will be clearly informed that participation is voluntary, no monetary compensation will be provided, and they maintain the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. The following script will be presented verbally to each participant, followed by an opportunity for questions and confirmation of understanding.

"This research study examines the lived experiences of Roman Catholic mothers whose adult children have revealed experiencing sexual abuse by Catholic clergy during their childhood. My goal is to understand how these mothers process, cope with, and find meaning in their children's disclosures, and to explore how this experience has changed or not changed them.

My interest in this research stems from my work as a clinical social worker serving Catholic clients who have encountered clergy abuse. While a lot of research exists on abuse survivors themselves, there is a significant gap in understanding how mothers of survivors are affected.

This study could contribute valuable insights that could enhance how mental health professionals support Catholic families following abuse disclosures.

Your involvement would include participating in 2-3 individual interviews, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. We can schedule these meetings at my private professional office in Garden City, New York or I may be able to arrange to meet you at another private, quiet location that works better for you. We also have the option of conducting interviews through secure, HIPAA-compliant video conferencing. With your permission, all conversations will be audio recorded to ensure accurate data collection.

While there are no direct benefits from participating, some individuals find value in sharing their stories and contributing to research that may help other families. However, discussing your child's abuse disclosure and your responses may bring up difficult emotions including sadness, anger, or guilt. You might experience distress when reflecting on your relationship with your

child or your faith community. Should you encounter emotional difficulty during our conversations, I will provide mental health resource information and offer a supportive debriefing. You are free to skip any questions that feel too uncomfortable, request breaks as needed, or discontinue participation entirely without any negative consequences.

Your privacy is of utmost importance. All personal information will remain strictly confidential. I will use pseudonyms and remove identifying details when writing up and presenting findings. You are welcome to choose your own pseudonym if you would like to. Interview recordings and related materials will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in my locked professional office or on a passcode protected computer in my locked office. Only my dissertation chair and two committee members will have access to the data. Following the required five-year retention period after my graduation, I will permanently destroy all records through secure deletion and document shredding.

What questions do you have about this research or the consent process? Could you please share with me what you understand about this study and what participation would involve?

Appendix G

Demographic Information Survey

What is your year of birth?

What is your gender?

What is your racial and/or ethnic identity?

Do you live in a rural, suburban, or urban area?

What state do you live in and what is your zip code?

What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

What is your current marital status?

How many children do you have and what are their current ages and genders?

Which child or children disclosed clergy-perpetrated abuse?

What was your child's age at the time of disclosure?

What year was the disclosure?

Who disclosed the abuse to you?

How old was your child when they were abused?

Are you currently a practicing Catholic?

Is the child who was abused currently a practicing Catholic?

Appendix H

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Each interview will use open-ended questions to elicit an in-depth narrative of the participant's experiences. I will use these prompts flexibly and in the context of a conversation to explore each category listed below.

Opening and Context

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your family?
2. How would you describe your family's relationship with the Catholic Church when your child was growing up?
3. What did being a Catholic and a mother mean to you during that time?

The Disclosure Experience

4. Can you tell me about when you first learned what happened to your child?
5. What was that moment like for you?
6. What thoughts and feelings went through your mind when you heard this?
7. What was it like to learn this involved someone from your Church?
8. How did you respond to your child in that moment?

Impact on Faith and Church Relationship

9. How has your relationship with the Catholic Church changed ornate changed since the disclosure?
10. What is it like for you to think about attending Mass or participating in Church activities now?
11. How do you make sense of what happened within the context of your faith?
12. What role, if any, does your faith play in your life now?

Mother-Child Relationship and Identity

13. How has your relationship with your adult child evolved since the disclosure?
14. What feelings come up for you about your role as a mother in all of this?

15. How has this experience affected your understanding of yourself as a mother?
16. How do you see yourself now, as both a Catholic and a mother?

Coping and Changes Over Time

17. How have you managed the feelings that have come up?
18. How has your experience of all this changed from when you first learned about it until now?
19. How has your ability to cope or make sense of this evolved over time?
20. What gives your life meaning now and how is this the same or different from before the disclosure?

Integration and Closing

21. How do you carry this experience with you in your daily life now?
22. What would you want other mothers in similar situations to know?
23. What feels most important for me to understand about your experience?
24. Is there anything we haven't talked about that feels significant to you?

Finally, I will use the following probes to elicit a deeper exploration as needed:

- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "What was that like for you?"
- "I'm noticing some emotion as you talk about this…"
- "Help me understand what you mean by…"
- "What feelings come up when you think about that?"
- "How did that sit with you?"

Appendix I

Mental Health Resources for Participants

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT RESOURCES
FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

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1. IMMEDIATE CRISIS SUPPORT (24/7, Free and Confidential)

- If you are in immediate danger or feel you cannot keep yourself safe, call 911
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988 or 1-800-273-8255
- Crisis Text Line: text TALK to 741741

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2. WHEN TO SEEK IMMEDIATE HELP

Contact emergency services (911) or go to nearest emergency room if experiencing: Thoughts of suicide or self-harm, Thoughts of harming others, Severe depression or anxiety that interferes with daily functioning, Flashbacks or trauma responses that feel overwhelming.

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3. CLERGY ABUSE SPECIFIC SUPPORT (Non-Crisis)

- SNAP Network (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests)

Support groups and advocacy for survivors and families www.snapnetwork.org/contact

- Voice of the Faithful (Support for Catholic families affected by abuse)

www.votf.org/voices-action/

- Into Account (Resources and advocacy for institutional abuse survivors)

www.intoaccount.org/survivors email: skrehbiel@intoaccount.org

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4. FIND A THERAPIST (Non-crisis)

- Psychology Today (Therapist Directory)

www.psychologytoday.com

Filter for therapists experienced with religious trauma, family therapy, PTSD

- International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (Find trauma specialists)

https://isstd.connectedcommunity.org/network/network-find-a-professional

- Open Path Psychotherapy Collective (Reduced-fee therapy: $30-$80 per session)

www.openpathcollective.org

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5. OTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT

- NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

https://www.nami.org/support-education/nami-helpline/

NAMI's helpline is available Monday through Friday from 10am until 10pm (eastern time)

by phone (1-800-950-6264), text (text NAMI to 62640), or email (helpline@nami.org)

NAMI can provide emotional support, mental health information, and connections to other needed resources.

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6. QUESTIONS TO ASK POTENTIAL THERAPISTS

Do you have experience with religious trauma or clergy abuse?

Do you work with family members of abuse survivors?

What are your fees and do you accept insurance?

Do you offer sliding scale payments?

How soon can I be seen?

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7. RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION

If you experience distress related to participation in this study, please contact:

Elizabeth B. Sullivan, LCSW-R

Phone: 516-712-4919

Email: esullivan@icsw.edu

I am available during business hours for referrals and support.

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8. IMPORTANT NOTES

This research is not therapy and the researcher cannot provide ongoing clinical treatment. These resources are provided to ensure you have access to appropriate professional support if needed.

This list is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute an endorsement of any particular provider or service. Participants are encouraged to research providers and choose those that best meet their individual needs.

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