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## Catholic Priests as Counselors: An Examination of Challenges Faced and Successful Techniques

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# Catholic Priests as Counselors: An Examination of Challenges Faced and Successful Techniques

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Today's Catholic priest plays a number of roles. He is expected to live a life similar to that of Jesus by setting an example as a leader, a helper, and a healer. Part of his job as a helper is to provide pastoral counseling services to parishioners and members of the public. Within this context, the Catholic priest must employ his knowledge of the Bible and spirituality to help individuals overcome such problems as depression, anxiety, marriage and family conflicts, and drug and alcohol abuse (see Worthington, Kurusu, McCollough, & Sardage, 1996). Americans often enlist the help of a Catholic priest when dealing with a personal problem as an initial means of coping or because they prefer to have spirituality included in their therapy sessions. According to Woodruff (2002), three million hours annually are spent with individuals in pastoral counseling, a form of therapy that combines both secular therapeutic techniques and spirituality. Clearly, Catholic Priests' use of spirituality within therapy is a welcome treatment plan for many and can lead to a more holistic course of treatment for the counseled person."

Catholic Priests as Counselors:  
An Examination  
of Challenges Faced and Successful Techniques

by

Mary McHale

Today's Catholic priest plays a number of roles. He is expected to live a life similar to that of Jesus by setting an example as a leader, a helper, and a healer. Part of his job as a helper is to provide pastoral counseling services to parishioners and members of the public. Within this context, the Catholic priest must employ his knowledge of the Bible and spirituality to help individuals overcome such problems as depression, anxiety, marriage and family conflicts, and drug and alcohol abuse (see Worthington, Kurusu, McCollough, & Sardage, 1996). Americans often enlist the help of a Catholic priest when dealing with a personal problem as an initial means of coping or because they prefer to have spirituality included in their therapy sessions. According to Woodruff (2002), three million hours annually are spent with individuals in pastoral counseling, a form of therapy that combines both secular therapeutic techniques and spirituality. Clearly, Catholic Priests' use of spirituality within therapy is a welcome treatment plan for many and can lead to a more holistic course of treatment for the counseled person.

Unfortunately, this role as a counselor can be a frustrating experience for many clergy members. Issues such as 1) a limited knowledge of psychotherapeutic skills and theoretical perspectives, 2) trust and boundary issues, 3) limited supervision in their roles as counselors, and 4) unrefined referral skills can leave a priest feeling burned out, frustrated, and possibly unable to meet the needs of the person he is counseling (see Bilich, et. al., 2000, Haug, 1999, & O'Kane & Millar, 2002). While happy to help others within their clergy roles, priests' demanding schedules may also lead to difficulty in properly meeting their parishioners' needs. All of these factors can contribute to Catholic priests' lack of confidence in the counseling area. The limited range of extensive counseling training and skills of some Roman Catholic priests may contribute to the

unsuccessful outcomes of their clients. Because of the importance of the integration of spirituality and therapy, this study will examine how Catholic priests counsel and identify how often, and in what capacity, each of these previously identified challenges present themselves.

The purpose of this project is to understand Catholic priests' perspectives on how they counsel and what they deem as successful or unsuccessful within a counseling session. By asking a series of questions related to each of the four challenges faced by priests, one can assess what makes a priest a successful or unsuccessful counselor. Based on this information, conclusions can be drawn related to each of these challenges and what skills or background training seems to be most effective in producing positive client outcomes and what added training may be necessary. Similarly to Lount and Hargie's (1997) study, this study examines how Catholic priests counsel by asking open-ended questions and allowing them to analyze their own counseling situations and use of skills. By including a range of years one has practiced as a priest and differing levels of background training, one is able to compare and contrast the counseling styles.

## Method

### *Sample*

Of the seventeen contacted, 8 Roman Catholic priests ranging from 6-38 years practicing as a priest were interviewed. The participants were of varying background education and training; some have had minimal counseling training ( e.g., undergraduate psychology courses ) and some have had more extensive or specialized education in counseling (e.g., marriage and family therapy training.)

### *Instrumentation/Procedure*

Data for this study were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted in person over a one month period. Interviews included questions such as: “Describe your background training in counseling?” “Describe how you keep confidentiality as a priest and how you keep confidentiality as a counselor?” and “Describe a typical counseling session?” Questions were constructed by the researcher in attempt to elicit responses related to each of the four anticipated challenges and background information.

### *Analysis*

The data analytical procedures used in this qualitative study included reorganizing all written notes into one of five categories: background information, knowledge of psychotherapeutic techniques, referral, trust and boundary issues, and support and supervision. Results were also organized in a spreadsheet format in order to provide comparison between interviews.

## Results

### *Knowledge of Psychotherapeutic Skills*

Most priests did describe a difference between therapy, pastoral counseling, and spiritual direction. Of the priests interviewed, three stated that they clarify what their limitations are in the beginning of a counseling session and state that they are not a therapist. As one participant described, “I definitely do not consider myself a therapist. I am not trained to be a therapist. I would even say I am barely trained to be a pastoral counselor.” However, four priests did label themselves as pastoral counselors, two labeled themselves as spiritual directors, and one priest would not consider himself to be any of the three types of counselors.

Confidentiality appears also to be a concern of each of the participants. While some were clear on the differences between confidentiality as a priest and confidentiality as a counselor, others seemed unsure. As one participant said, “I don’t know exactly what the laws of public confidentiality are relative to a person who comes to me. I don’t think it’s quite as impenetrable as the seal of confession, but it certainly is pretty substantial.” Some priests also seemed unclear about what exactly to report to authorities. Four of the priests interviewed stated that they were mandated reporters of child abuse; others were unclear. Three initially stated that there was not a difference between confidentiality within counseling and confession. Of these three, two went on to describe circumstances when they would breach confidentiality within counseling such as child abuse and homicidal/suicidal thoughts among the person they are counseling. However, all eight priests agreed that they are not to break the seal of confession under any circumstances.

All participants agreed that certain skills that they possessed did help them within their counseling. Active listening was ranked high as an important asset to counseling interactions. Other skills included communication skills, empathy/compassion, knowing when to be assertive, helping people to take responsibility for their own feelings, knowing referral resources, and self-knowledge. One individual believed that knowledge of theoretical frameworks was important to his counseling. One priest described the method he employs by saying: “For me, it’s more of a conversational thing. Again, I’m probably not trained enough to employ some kind of clear method. It’s mostly listening. I’m a pretty good listener.” Another participant acknowledged his own lack of training on specific issues by saying the following:

I guess some of the skills that I don't know if I possess...would be some of the academic skills in terms of following a specific issue, knowing where it goes, what the points of healing or resolve are...just knowing some of those things.

Of those interviewed, four participants agreed that seminary training was inadequate preparation for the counseling they were currently doing, one believed that his seminary training was adequate, and three seemed unsure. Those who claimed that seminary training was inadequate agreed that there was a need for further hands-on training and more of an emphasis on the priest as an individual. Those who were unsure felt as though their training was adequate for the purposes of what they do, even though they admit this training was limited. As one participant stated, "I think I'm fine because I'm not looking to be a full-time counselor. I'm fortunate living where I do; I have good resources." Another was a bit more ambiguous, saying, "Do I think I was adequately prepared? I guess I think I'm doing all right. Could I have had better or fuller preparation? Absolutely."

### *Trust and Boundary Issues*

Some priests expressed that they were aware of the "Catholic guilt" that one may experience when coming to a priest counselor. That is, the Catholic Church represents a large body of law in which some behaviors are acceptable and others are not. One priest believed that this body of teaching must be put aside for the purposes of counseling. However, another said that, if he sees a person in counseling, he would not be able to validate any relations outside of marriage that a person may be having if he sees him or her in counseling. Clearly, there are conflicting opinions on how to deal with this issue.

One individual described boundaries as being “pretty lax” within the Catholic Church. He acknowledged the fact that priests and bishops practicing thirty years ago did the best they could with the education they had and “traveled by the lights that they had.” Clergymen at that time agreed with the assumption that individuals who were suffering from this type of mental illness could get a small amount of treatment, pray, and “everybody’s fine.” In more recent years, he believes that clergymen are realizing that this type of mental illness does not simply go away and further attention must be paid to the way priests counsel each other because of it. While this participant trusts that the way priests counsel has changed significantly in the last thirty years, he also thinks that many lessons are yet to be learned. He notes that a large amount of language within the church is about family, but that “even families have boundaries.” He believes that a change in the understanding of these boundaries will lead to a change in the way priests counsel, behave, and address each other.

#### *Supervision and Support*

It is clear that there is no formal opportunity for addressing counseling concerns and issues within the sampled diocese. While there is no formal gathering, seven priests felt as though they were comfortable with going to other priests or mental health professionals to express concerns about a particular counseling experience in general terms. However, three participants did express an interest in having some kind of gathering to discuss counseling issues.

#### *Referral*

All eight participants have provided referrals to other mental health professionals for counseled individuals as needed. Seven priests stated that they give referrals often,

and one stated that he gave referrals only on occasion for issues such as substance abuse. Four priests interviewed agreed that religion cannot solve all psychological problems. Issues such as substance abuse and significant mental illness were described as grounds for referral. One priest described what he perceived to be the outcome of his counseling sessions: “It’s almost like a triage...where you assess what they need. Most of the time I don’t find couples coming back. I’m presuming they’re going on. When I was younger I’d see people more. Now I really try to encourage them much stronger [to seek counseling elsewhere] . . . maybe because I’m more aware of my limitations and I’m more aware of the strengths that counselors can bring.” Of those interviewed, six priests expressed having some sort of personal relationship with the mental health professionals to whom he is referring.

#### *Differences in Counseling Practice Related to Background Training and Years of Experience*

Of the 8 priests interviewed, three can be considered to have had more extensive background training than the others. Two of the three priests with extensive education were certain about their duty to breach confidentiality if the counseled person was perceived to be a threat to himself or others. One of the three also acknowledged a difficulty that may be present due to his role as a counselor and a priest. He expressed the challenge faced by this dual relationship by saying, “I think one of the profound differences between a priest as a counselor...versus a counselor, is...a counselor is [almost never] going to be there the next day or the next week at the dinner table.” The three had a clearer understanding of mandated reporting and confidentiality than the other five participants. These three individuals also seemed most comfortable with referral,

although there did not appear to be a difference in the frequency of referral between those who had more education and those who did not; all usually referred after 2-3 sessions.

These three participants also provided definite answers to the question posed to them regarding whether or not seminary had adequately prepared them for the counseling that they were currently providing. Each agreed that seminary education was inadequate for him to feel comfortable counseling others. Consequently, each chose to pursue further education in counseling.

### Discussion

A number of parallels can be drawn between these results and that of former research, such as common counseling skills used by priests, lack of background training, and anticipated challenges related to lack of supervision and boundary issues (see Lount & Hargie, 1997, Domino, 1990, and O’Kane & Millar, 2002). However, differences can also be found related to the level of difficulty with referral that priest counselors experience (see McMinn et. al. and Weaver et. al., 1997). All of these similarities and differences provide an outlook of priests as counselors who do experience and acknowledge challenges, but seem aware of these difficulties and make every attempt to act in a way that is best for the counseled person.

The most obvious and expected similarity between this and previous research was in regard to types of problems seen and skills used in counseling. Likewise, priests sampled for this study agreed with the goals of counseling and idea of how change occurs within the counseled person in similar ways as those sampled by Benes et. al. (2000).

One unique finding provided by this study is the regularity in which these referrals were actually made. Unlike past research (see Plante, 1999), priests within this

sample seemed fully aware of the importance of referring their counseled people to other more fully trained professionals. Interestingly, it seems that priests with increased education and greater years of experience were even more aware of their own limitations as counselors than those who had been practicing as a priest for fewer years. This suggests that, despite further counseling education, priests are aware that the time and energy that must be devoted to being a fully functioning and effective counselor may simply not be available or reasonable for busy diocesan priests.

With this in mind, perhaps the focus of future research should be more on the assessment of referral skills for priest counselors than extensive counseling education. Based on the unique findings related to referral in this study, it seems that there is a need for more of a focus on refinement of referral skills, education on issues such as improving recognition of symptoms for those who need to be referred, and to whom to refer. This may be more practical than comprehensive counseling education. It is obvious that priests have a number of duties within the church. It simply may not be feasible to focus only on one aspect of the ministry by providing training for priests to be professional therapists, especially in light of the current priest shortage (Address, 2001).

While these themes seemed to emerge from this sample, further research must be conducted to provide more support for the importance of increased referral education. Due to the small, somewhat homogeneous sample and the sampling technique used, generalizability for this study is limited. Another limitation of this study is the lack of frequencies related to actual occurrences of referral by priests. However, suggestions provided here can be supported with further assessment of current referral skills and measures of the frequencies of referral within a larger sample of priests. Referral

education currently being provided within the seminary education should also be assessed. Perhaps other denominations of clergy counselors can also be examined in order to ascertain how other religions are dealing with this challenging issue.

This study represents a first step toward a better understanding of how Catholic priests perceive their counseling experiences. By comprehending which challenges are being faced and which techniques seem to be effective, a clearer picture of counseling within the Catholic Church can be portrayed. With further understanding of these issues, the church may choose to change how they counsel and consequently make Catholic priests a prime example of how counseled people can benefit from the use of spirituality within counseling.

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