Why Adult Clergy Abuse Gets Dismissed

Coercive Control in Safeguarding Systems

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Background & Significance

39%

of adult survivors meet PTSD criteria (higher than combat veterans)

<10%

report abuse to their church

0

survivors in Pooler's national survey received an overall positive church response

"Many people — including survivors themselves — label these cases as affairs. In reality, they are an abuse of spiritual power."

Method: Cross-cultural analysis applying coercive control framework to existing research on adult clergy sexual abuse and institutional response patterns.

Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022). Social Work, 67(2), 123–133 | Baylor University Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse Advocacy & Research Collaborative | Garland & Chaves (2009)

The Primary Context: Pastoral Care & Spiritual Direction

62%

of abuse began within a counseling or spiritual direction relationship

~75%

of all clergy abuse cases occur or begin in the context of pastoral care

Spiritual direction is the relationship of maximum interior vulnerability.

The person who seeks direction opens their interior life — fears, wounds, relationship with God, deepest longings — to someone they believe has spiritual authority and acts as a proxy for God.

Consent frameworks were not designed for this relationship.

Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022). Social Work, 67(2), 123–133 | Leimgruber (2022). Religions, 13(3), 256

Current safeguarding asks:

"Did the adult consent?"

Pooler: "Consent is not being sought or obtained. There is no other helping profession that views sexual interactions in the way we allow ministers to get away with."

The question fails because it does not account for the power structure of the relationship.

Pooler, D.K. "It Is Not an Affair: It Is Abuse." Baptist Women in Ministry | Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022)

Why: The Formation Gap

St. John Paul II
Pastores Dabo Vobis, §45

"The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation."

Human formation is the foundation.
When incomplete, priests carry unmet attachment and identity needs into ministry.

Dr. Peter Malinoski, Ph.D.
Souls & Hearts

Lack of human formation in clergy leads to boundary violations.

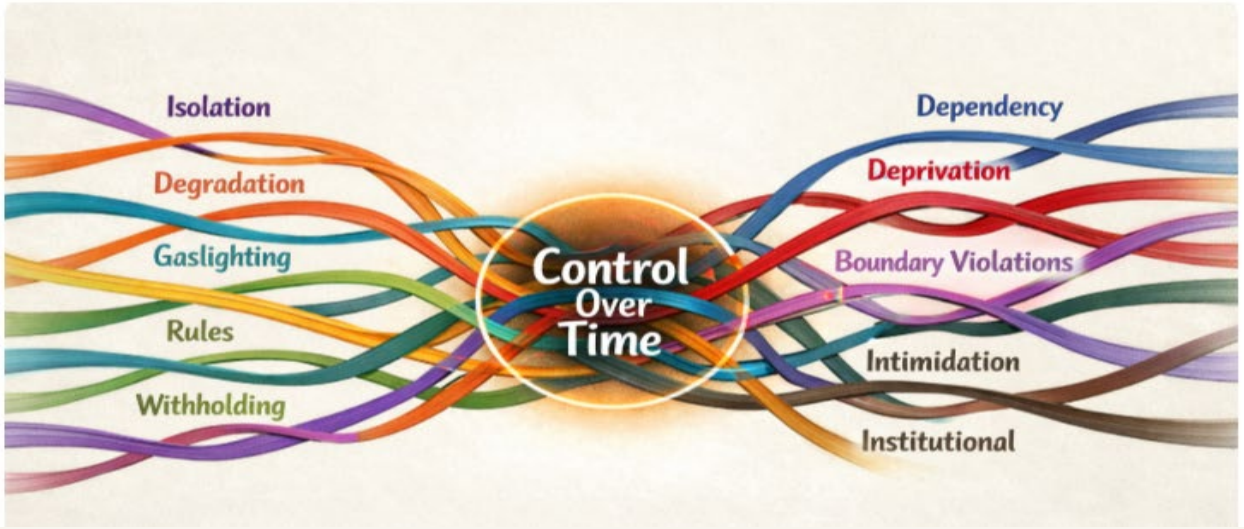
When attachment and identity needs are unmet, the pastoral relationship — with its intimacy and power — becomes the place where those needs are filled: through control, enmeshment, and dependency creation.

John Paul II (1992). Pastores Dabo Vobis, §45 | Malinoski & Crete (2020, May 22). Church Scandal: Abuse of Authority. Fly on the Wall podcast | Malinoski (2024). Human Formation: Identifying and Recovering from Spiritual Abuse. Divine Fulfillment Conference (SOCA-sponsored event)

Coercive Control: A Patterned System

"A patterned course of conduct that restricts autonomy and creates dependency over time. Not one behavior — a system." —Stark (2007)

Spiritual Authority | **Role Authority** | **Institutional Authority** | **Knowledge of Vulnerability** | **Relational Influence**



Not all pastoral relationships involve coercive control.
But where it is present, it fundamentally changes what safeguarding is evaluating.

Stark, E. (2007). Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life. Oxford University Press.

The Four Patterns: How Coercive Control Drives Dismissal

01

Moral Reframing

Abuse is reclassified as an affair, consensual relationship, or sin requiring forgiveness. Language shapes institutional response.

02

Gaslighting & Reputational Harm

The person who was harmed has their credibility attacked, perception questioned, and mental state publicly challenged.

03

Institutional Silence as Control

Non-response, delay, and narrative management by the institution extend the original coercive control pattern.

04

Cultural Amplification

Clericalism, gender norms, obedience structures, and migration vulnerability each intensify these patterns across cultures.

Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022) | Leimgruber (2022) | Stark (2007) | Proposal: How Coercive Control Drives the Dismissal of Adult Clergy Abuse, ISC 2026

Survival Responses Are Not Consent

These responses are indistinguishable from consent without a power analysis.

SURVIVAL RESPONSES UNDER THREAT

NOT CONSENT

1. FEAR OF ESCALATION AND HARM

- Fear that resistance will make the situation worse
- Fear of being seriously harmed or killed
- Fear triggered by isolation, confinement, or perceived weapons

2. STRATEGIC COMPLIANCE FOR SURVIVAL

- Speaking calmly to avoid provoking violence
- Saying “nice things” to de-escalate
- Asking the attacker to “finish quickly” to minimize harm

3. ANTICIPATED DISBELIEF AND JUDGMENT

- Expectation they will not be believed
- Anticipation of questions, doubt, and suspicion
- Fear of being blamed for their own assault

4. CULTURAL MYTHS ABOUT “REAL RAPE”

- Belief that rape must involve extreme physical resistance
- Internalized myths that silence those who did not “fight back”
- Legal and social standards requiring proof of innocence

5. PROTECTION FROM SECONDARY HARM

- Silence chosen to avoid re-traumatization
- Fear that disclosure will be worse than the assault
- Fear of losing relationships, credibility, or safety

Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022). Social Work, 67(2) | Pooler & Droesch (2025). Pastoral Psychology

What Coercive Control Sounds Like

Undermining Reality

"You are confused."

"You are causing division."

Control & Punishment

"Don't ever try to leave again."

"Because I said so."

Spiritual Coercion

"You are going to hell."

"She doesn't respect authority."

Reputation Attack

"She is mentally confused."

"She was in love with the priest."

What matters is not any single statement.
It is the pattern across time that shapes perception, limits autonomy, and controls behavior.

HARM

(what is done to the victim)

- Control
- Isolation
- Gaslighting
- Intimidation
- Boundary violations

PROTECTION

(what the institution provides to the perpetrator)

- Credibility protection
- Reputation protection
- Institutional shielding
- Restricted accountability
- Narrative control

Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022) | Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler (2025). Traumatology

Legal Systems Are Recognizing This

14

states have criminalized adult clergy sexual abuse

The legal shift reflects the same argument:

- Authority and dependency can invalidate consent
- Clergy are treated like therapists when acting in a counseling or spiritual advisory role
- Multiple states: 'Consent is not a defense' where power differentials exist
- Advocates are pushing to expand these protections across all jurisdictions

"There is no other helping profession that views sexual interactions in the way we allow ministers to get away with." —Dr. David Pooler

Huh (2024). Baylor University ACSA Research Collaborative | Pooler (n.d.). It Is Not an Affair: It Is Abuse. BWIM

Across Contexts and Cultures

These four patterns are not culturally specific. Culture amplifies them.

Clericalism

Clerical authority positioned above scrutiny; institutional loyalty over accountability

Gender Norms

Women's accounts systematically discounted; male clerical credibility presumed

Obedience Structures

Spiritual obedience weaponized; questioning authority framed as sin

Migration Vulnerability

Dependency on clergy community intensifies when other support systems are absent

One pattern. Many contexts. The same mechanism.

In some contexts, reporting a priest carries the cost of community ostracism — making silence not a choice but a condition of survival.

ISC 2026 Theme: One Commitment, Many Contexts — Safeguarding Across Cultures

Leimgruber (2022). Religions, 13(3), 256 | Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022) | Garland (2009)

WHAT SAFEGUARDING REQUIRES

- ASSESS **POWER**, NOT JUST BEHAVIOR
- IDENTIFY **COERCIVE CONTROL** PATTERNS
- RECOGNIZE **DEPENDENCY** AND VULNERABILITY
- INTERPRET **RESPONSES** THROUGH A SURVIVAL LENS
- EXAMINE **INSTITUTIONAL** DYNAMICS, NOT JUST INDIVIDUALS

WE ARE NOT EVALUATING ACTIONS.
WE ARE EVALUATING CONDITIONS.

Key References

Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022). Social Work, 67(2), 123–133 | Pooler & Droesch (2025). Pastoral Psychology

Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler (2025). Traumatology | Leimgruber (2022). Religions, 13(3), 256

Stark, E. (2007). Coercive Control. Oxford Univ. Press | John Paul II (1992). Pastores Dabo Vobis, §45

Malinoski (2024). Human Formation & Spiritual Abuse. SOCA Conf. | Malinoski & Crete (2020). Fly on the Wall podcast | Huh (2024). Baylor ACSA Collaborative

"If we do not recognize coercive control, we will continue to dismiss abuse we are responsible to see."

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