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# The Ongoing Pandemic of Child Abuse

BY MARK JOSEPH WILLIAMS · PUBLISHED JUNE 22, 2020 · UPDATED JUNE 22, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is easing in some areas, increasing elsewhere, and settling into an ongoing reality everywhere. At the same time, the United States is facing a reckoning with our terrible legacy of racism following the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis.

This tsunami of developments has proved to be, for so many, a revelation of the injustices in our world—racial and economic inequality, the exploitation of weakest, the absence of solidarity. I pray this awakening will usher in a new era of justice and mercy.

But as the survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I also know that times like these can leave many children and others exposed to predators who take advantage of the confusion and distraction.

The intense pressures of lengthy lockdowns, for example, have already led to a spike in domestic violence cases, and children are also vulnerable.

While families stayed at home under quarantine in the initial weeks of the pandemic this past March, half of the visitors to the National Sexual Assault Hotline were minors. As Scott Berkowitz, president of RAINN (Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network) put it: "Sadly, it is likely that the risk of children being sexually abused will increase as shelter-in-place orders continue—one more tragic consequence of the public health crisis the country currently faces."

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But as the lockdowns begin to ease, and people push to return to whatever the "new normal" will look like, the risks to children will not end. Indeed, they may actually increase.

This is a lesson I learned the hard way, fifty years ago, after another, though long-forgotten, pandemic, one that played a devastating role in my life.

In 1968, my father, a nuclear armaments veteran, was suffering from acute leukemia when he contracted the virus of that time: the Hong Kong flu, a pandemic that took the lives of nearly one million people around the world. My father was doubly victimized: he was especially susceptible to the Hong Kong Flu because he had been secretly stationed at a Nevada nuclear testing site in 1951. God only knows how much ionizing radiation he was exposed to during the months he spent there. His family had never been told the true nature of his military service. Most everyone thought he was going to fight in Korea. He became a casualty of that war, but two decades later when he was fighting for his life on a new battlefield, struggling against the ravages of leukemia. We only learned the truth of its source as he breathed his last.

Nothing could protect my father from the influenza pandemic. He was not yet forty years old and dying, and during a year, 1968, marked by upheavals eerily similar to our own. The day after Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot dead by a white racist, I asked my father why someone would want to kill Dr. King. I was just eleven. "Son," he told me, "there are people in this world who do not like others of a different skin color. Never be that way, always love all."

His prophetic words have pierced my core for the past half-century, and they haunt me today, just as the images of COVID patients dying in isolated ICU beds have brought back so many memories.

I recall pulling up a stool next to him in his room at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City, the same hospital where so many coronavirus patients succumbed. He lay in a full protective bubble. I had to touch him through a rubber glove which extended from a plastic sleeve. He turned his head and fought to smile. His hollowed eyes reached mine. We were Catholic. I was an altar boy, and I felt like the women at the foot of the Cross as Jesus hung above them, dying. Two hours later my father died. I had just turned twelve, and I didn't realize that my darkest days were ahead.

His death left our family shattered. My mother fell prey to her alcoholism, and I fell prey to her escalating physical and mental abuse. Father figures in the community sought me out. Some were well-intentioned, others were not. In my thirteenth year, I was raped by a male teacher. Molestation by a Roman Catholic priest would follow. This set me on a journey into depression and addiction that I can barely find words for. As William Styron, author of *Darkness Visible—A Memoir of Madness*, wrote: "Depression is a disorder of mood, so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self—to the meditating intellect – as to verge close to being beyond description."

The toll of sexual abuse is similarly difficult to convey. Sexual abuse can lead to madness, a stripping of mind and heart. Shame consumes the soul. Relief, always fleeting, started early for me—drinking the same scotch my mother used to assuage her demons.

Are the minors calling into the hotline today, during this crisis, desiring safety and relief? I have no doubt they are. Forced isolation leaves children easy prey. As Scott Berkowitz of RAINN put it: "Unfortunately, for many, and especially for children experiencing sexual abuse, 'stay at home' doesn't mean 'safe at home.'"

But the risks won't end when the lockdown ends. More than 100,000 Americans have lost their lives to COVID-19, and another 100,000 are likely to die by September, according to the latest projections. Each life is a terrible loss, but the death of parents and guardians is a double loss as children are left especially vulnerable, as I was.

For me, the church that was an arena of my abuse also offered the faith that became my lifeline back to health. It has taken decades. As COVID-19 continues to upset so many lives, I do find some comfort in reflecting upon my recovery, and in realizing that healing is possible for those who are being hurt at present. In the second half of my life, my interior captivity has indeed been freed. For me, forgiveness calms the storm. "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." *Matthew 21:22*. Time takes time.

What we as a society need to do, right now, is to act decisively so that the abuse does not happen in the first place. The Catholic Church under Pope Francis has learned many hard lessons thanks to survivors who have spoken up. We must be at the forefront of this urgent task, unabashedly committed to modeling what is right. No more covering up sin. This current global public health crisis puts an added spotlight on just how vulnerable children are. We don't need testing, or a vaccine, to address this. We need to realize how much we can—and must—do now. Even while quarantined, if we observe anything that suggests that a child is being abused, we must speak up. This is the very least we can do, as Christians, and as human beings.

I hope that all of humanity emerges from this pandemic and this moment of racial reckoning truly changed. If this is a replay of 1968, that means we will be re-living these traumas in another fifty years. When I think of all that I have had to go through during these decades in order to find grace and healing, what grieves me most is the idea that we will have ignored the blaring warnings about child abuse just as we ignored the constant alerts about the pandemic and the persistent evidence of systemic racism.

This article was originally published in *Sapientia*, the blog of the Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University.

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Mark Joseph Williams  
Mark Joseph Williams, a parishioner and special advisor in the Archdiocese of Newark, is a forensic social worker and management consultant.

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Suzanne · 9 days ago  
It is so sad and so true that this pandemic will have such terrible and lasting implications for many children well beyond the actual virus itself. This is an important piece and beautifully written as well. Thank you for sharing.

Andreas Garshol · 9 days ago  
-Shame consumes the Soul- So true, and I want to add - the shame can become so integrated into normal life that you hardly notice it - probably as a survival strategy, but it still consumes you and will very often makes it ugly head known true abusers behavior and addictions. Thank you for this article!

Christopher Lake9 · 9 days ago  
Thank you for writing this, Mark.

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