

Child Sexual Abuse within the Catholic Church in Spain: A Descriptive Analysis of its Characteristics and Long-Term Impact

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ABSTRACT

Sexual abuse within the Catholic Church is a serious social issue and a significant public health problem that has caused extensive harm worldwide. In 2022, an independent commission was established in Spain to investigate sexual abuse within the Church. The commission gathered data from 334 victims (82.3% men, 17.7% women), who were predominantly aged between 55 and 74 years old (62.5%). A majority of victims (71.0%) endured sexual abuse involving physical contact, while 21% reported instances of oral, anal, or vaginal penetration. Over half of the victims (57.5%) reported emotional and behavioral issues, as well as functional problems, problems in relationships, sexuality, and cognition, and attributed these difficulties to the abuse. The majority of participants (79.0%) had disclosed the abuse before the study, with the Church taking action in 45.8% of cases. Approximately 8.4% of victims reported the perpetrator was relocated, while 16.2% described institutional efforts to conceal the abuse. In conclusion, victims of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Spain faced consequences that had a significant impact on their lives, exacerbated by lack of societal recognition and a prevalent dynamic of cover-up and concealment by the Church.

The problem of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church has garnered heightened international attention, starting with the initial scandals involving abuse perpetrated by clergy in the United States in the late 20th century (Dressing et al., 2017). In response to the profound societal concerns arising from these events, various initiatives have been launched both by different countries and within the Church itself. Particularly notable among the initiatives are investigative commissions convened by state institutions or through decisions taken by episcopal conferences (Tamarit, 2018). The outcomes of these efforts are reports that serve as valuable contributions to comprehending and addressing such a complex issue.

Most of the resulting reports have focused specifically on child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Catholic Church, though some have also covered other forms of child abuse within institutions, such as those in Ireland (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009) and Australia (Family and Community Development Committee, Parliament of Victoria Australia, 2013), which were undertaken as a result of government initiatives. Among the former are reports commissioned by national conferences of Catholic bishops, such as those in the United States (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004), France (Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église, 2021), and Portugal (Comissão Independente para o Estudo dos Abusos Sexuais de Crianças na Igreja Católica Portuguesa, 2023).

In Spain, the issue of CSA within the Catholic Church has long been invisible or perceived as a matter of little public importance (Rashid & Barron, 2022). However, as with other countries where the Catholic Church has a significant social presence, the phenomenon has featured increasingly on the public agenda (Sáez Martínez, 2015). This is largely a result of the efforts of victims to make their cases public and obtain justice (Varona & Martínez,

2015). It is also due to the work of the media, which has investigated reports of systematic abuse (see, for example, the case of Ireland in Donnelly & Inglis, 2010). As a result, the sexual abuse of children perpetrated by individuals associated with the Catholic Church has shifted from being a matter of low public importance to becoming an increasingly discussed issue in Spanish society.

A few recent academic studies have investigated CSA within the Catholic Church in Spain (e.g., Pereda & Segura, 2021). These studies have, either focused on illustrating the characteristics and severity of its consequences, including judicial sentences related to cases of CSA perpetrated by religious leaders (Tamarit et al., 2023) or utilized in-depth interviews of members of the Catholic clergy to assess their perceptions of the problem of CSA within the Spanish Catholic Church and to explore aspects related to the Church's cultural and institutional structure that is conducive to CSA (Tamarit & Balcells, 2022). These initial studies point to significant differences in the average age of onset of abuse between victims of abuse within the Catholic Church and victims of abuse not perpetrated within the Church, with the Church's victims being older and more likely to be post pubertal at abuse onset (Cimbolich & Cartor, 2006). Regarding the gender of victims, there is a higher prevalence of boys among the victims of clergy, which is in line with previous findings (McPhillips et al., 2022). While very few studies have analyzed the specific consequences of sexual abuse perpetrated by the clergy, existing evidence reveals that the severity of the effects are as great as the severity of the effects associated with intrafamilial abuse (McGraw et al., 2019). Pinto-Cortez, Suárez-Soto, et al. (2022) review highlights that victims of Church abuse often report spiritual impacts, affecting trust in the Catholic

Church and faith in God. Other studies, such as that of Farrell and Taylor (2000), also reveal significant symptoms of spiritual and theological crisis in victims, likely due to the fact that the abuse of spiritual power is a key characteristic of this type of abuse (Pereda et al., 2022). Likewise, research on victims of CSA by the Catholic Church in Spain suggest that the use of religious symbols, objects, and images within the context of abuse stands as a specific feature of this form of sexual victimization in Spanish victims (Pereda & Tamarit, 2023). It should be noted that, owing to factors such as the nonrandom nature of the samples in these previous Spanish studies, the results are not necessarily generalizable to all victims of CSA perpetrated by the clergy in the country. Notwithstanding the initial results, therefore, the shortcomings of our existing knowledge on sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Spain are important to bear in mind.

Aim of the study

In March 2022, the Spanish Congress of Deputies entrusted the Ombudsman of Spain with the responsibility to address a social, ethical, and political imperative expressed by the public and conveyed through the pleas of victims of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Following this mandate, the

Ombudsman established a commission of advisors to compile a report to address the victims' requests for reparation. In pursuit of this objective, a forum was set up to collect the demands of Spanish victim associations. Crucially, a victim support unit (VSU) was created to assist victims.

The aim of this study is to present the first results obtained from the work of the VSU. The study seeks to provide a detailed account of the sociodemographic characteristics of the victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by members of the Catholic Church in Spain and present the nature of the abuse they endured, as well as document the adverse consequences that they have faced throughout their lives they believe are a result of these abuse experiences. As findings from inquiries around the world have shown that victims of the clergy were predominantly boys/men (Böhm et al., 2014) gender analysis will be provided. Furthermore, we also sought to evaluate if the self-reported consequences of the abuse varied based on its severity (penetrative vs. non penetrative abuse). We aim to contribute to recent studies conducted worldwide demonstrating the far-reaching and severe impact on such abuse.

Method

Participants and procedure

The VSU, which was established in July 2022, was a multidisciplinary team of professionals in psychology, criminology, social work, and law. The VSU's main tasks involved a) hearing and collecting testimonies of abuse within the Catholic Church; b) entering the collected data into a platform for inclusion in the final report of the Ombudsman; and c) assisting individuals who required help as victims of sexual abuse. Anyone who contacted the unit was initially contacted by the VSU coordinator, who enquired about the main characteristics of the reported incident. Subsequently, one of the VSU's professionals was assigned to the case and would schedule and conduct an interview, which could consist of one or several sessions depending on the case. The interviews with victims were conducted as conversations, providing a space for victims to state their experiences, share how their victimization has affected their lives, and discuss any challenges that they may have faced when attempting to report the abuse. Each interviewee was also informed of any available support resources, both from the Catholic Church and from external organizations. Interviews were conducted in accordance with the victims' preferences, taking place preferably in person either at the VSU's headquarters or in locations near the interviewee's residence when arranging travel was possible.

The study obtained ethical approval from the review board of the Ombudsman of Spain. The approval process involved a comprehensive review of the study protocol to ensure compliance with ethical standards and protection of the rights and well-being of participants.

Sample

The VSU received a total of 517 requests between July 2022 and July 2023. Out

of all the received requests, 405 fell within the remit of the VSU. Interviews were scheduled with 405 individuals, but 32 of them were excluded for reasons such as refusal to participate or insufficient information. As a result, 373 testimonies were included in the official report: 334 individuals provided information on sexual abuse that they had experienced first-hand and also, in some cases, recounted the experiences of others, while the remaining 39 participants shared testimonies only related to instances of sexual abuse experienced by others (for example, cases in which the victim had died and their relatives recounted their experience on their behalf). The present paper will present data only from the 334 victims who provided direct testimony, guaranteeing first-hand information on each case of abuse.

Measures

The present study collected both qualitative and quantitative data through a semi-structured interview, utilizing qualitative analysis to amplify participant voices and illustrate the quantitative findings (Plano Clark, 2017) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of clergy-perpetrated CSA victims.

Sociodemographic information

In the first section, sociodemographic information was collected about the interviewee, including contact details, date of birth, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, number of children, residence, employment status, education level, and whether the victim had experienced other types of victimization. All this information was given voluntarily, which means that in some cases a participant chose not to disclose data. Any decision not to disclose data has been labeled as “undisclosed” in the results.

Sexual abuse

The second section detailed various aspects of the abuse, including its frequency (once, more than once, or chronic), type (with or without physical contact, penetration), the age range during which the abuse occurred, the location (church-related or not), the utilization of participants’ faith as a strategy in committing the abuse, the presence of multiple perpetrators and their count, awareness of other victims of the same perpetrator along with their number, and whether participants believed others knew about the abuse. This information is crucial, especially given the tendency of many victims to remain silent, even when aware of other cases (Keenan, 2012).

Consequences

The third section of the interview focused on the consequences of the abuse, based on previous literature reviews by Blakemore et al. (2017), McGraw et al. (2019), and Pinto-Cortez, Suárez-Soto, et al. (2022). Accordingly, the consequences were divided into six different categories: (a) emotional and behavioral problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, suicidality); (b) cognitive problems (e.g. hyperactivity, poor academic performance, attention problems); (c) relationship problems (e.g. social anxiety, problems with part-

ner, social isolation); (d) functional problems (e.g. sleep difficulties, somatic complaints, substance use); (e) sexual problems (e.g. unsatisfactory and dysfunctional sexuality, risky sexual behaviors); and (f) consequences on faith, including both religious beliefs and belief in the Catholic Church (e.g. apostasy). In this section, the interviewer also gathered information on whether the individual had undergone therapy, received a diagnosis, or been prescribed any medications.

Disclosure

The last section of the interview focused on disclosure of the incident. Victims were asked questions about whether they chose to formally disclose it, and if so, what actions were taken as a result. The actions included measures such as relocating the perpetrator or victim, imposing restrictions on the perpetrator's contact with minors, and other interventions. Along the same lines, victims were asked about any covering up of

the abuse by others. In addition, respondents were asked about their perspectives on transparency of the reporting process, their overall positive or negative perception of the reporting, and the presence of any confidentiality clauses.

Data analyses

Quantitative analyses were performed using Jamovi 2.3 open-source software, with a statistical significance level of $p < .05$. Differences between genders and types of abuse were assessed by calculating the chi-square statistic, while Cramer's V was used as the measure of effect size. To ensure a more reliable statistical analysis, the Fisher's exact test was employed when the sample size was small or when expected cell frequencies in a chi-square test were less than 5. To report the characteristics of sexual victimization (i.e. age of onset and cessation of sexual abuse, type of abuse, use of religious objects or symbols, number of perpetrators, and data related to disclosure and reporting) and the characteristics of any other victimization experiences, univariate analyses were used (percentage, mean, standard deviation, maximum and minimum values). With regard to the consequences of the abuse, two groups were compared using both the chi-square statistic and the odds ratio test: a) those who had experienced sexual abuse with physical contact, such as fondling or kissing, and b) those who had experienced penetration, including vaginal, anal, or oral penetration. The t-test was used to assess whether there was a statistically significant difference between the means of the compared groups when the studied variable was continuous.

In keeping with the specific objectives of the study, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilized to analyze the qualitative data as a complementary aspect to the quantitative findings. The qualitative analysis aimed to uncover narratives that could provide additional insight into the characteristics and consequences of CSA within the Catholic Church. Initially, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading through transcripts of vic-

tims' narratives. Subsequently, regular meetings were conducted to identify emerging themes from the transcripts and refine the coding framework. Through this process, several distinct themes emerged, including "Consequences of the abuse," which delineated the broad and often enduring effects experienced by victims, such as behavioral issues, trust deficits, and disrupted interpersonal relationships. Another theme, "Spiritual Struggle," captured the profound impact on victims' faith and spiritual well-being. Additionally, "Narratives of Resilience" underscored their strength, coping mechanisms, and the factors enabling them to overcome adversity, while "Institutional Concealment" shed light on instances where the Church hierarchy facilitated or covered up abuse. This approach was selected based on insights gleaned from the preceding quantitative analysis.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative results were integrated. Specifically, we used victims' narratives to illustrate certain quantitative results and gain deeper insights into the experiences of CSA victims.

Results

Participant characteristics

The sample contained 334 individuals, 275 men and 59 women (82.3% and 17.7%, respectively), aged between 27 and 93 years old ($M = 60.6$; $SD = 11.5$). The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in

Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Variable	Men (n=275)		Women (n=59)		Total (N=334)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age						
Mean (SD)	61.7 (11.1)		55.5 (12.3)		60.6 (11.5)	
18-34 years old	6	2.2	3	5.1	9	2.7
35-54 years old	58	21.1	25	42.4	83	24.9
55-64 years old	82	29.8	19	32.2	101	30.2
65-74 years old	100	36.4	8	13.6	108	32.3
75 years old and above	24	8.7	4	6.8	28	8.4
Undisclosed	5	1.8	0	0.0	5	1.5
Country of residence						
Spain	241	87.6	49	83.1	290	86.8
Other	11	4.0	3	5.1	14	4.2
Undisclosed	23	8.4	7	11.9	30	9.0
Marital status						
Married/Analogous Relationship	167	60.7	29	49.2	196	58.7
Divorced/Separated	44	16.0	15	25.4	59	17.7
Single	43	15.6	12	20.3	55	16.5
Other	8	2.9	3	5.1	11	3.3
Undisclosed	13	4.7	0	0.0	13	3.9
Educational level						
No studies	2	0.7	2	3.4	4	1.2
Primary school	21	7.6	4	6.8	25	7.5
Secondary school	14	5.1	3	5.1	17	5.1
Upper secondary	76	27.6	15	25.4	91	27.2
University studies	145	52.7	33	55.9	178	53.3
Undisclosed	17	6.2	2	3.4	19	5.7
Employment status						
Student	3	1.1	1	1.7	4	1.2
Employed	99	36.0	32	54.2	131	39.2
Unemployed	20	7.3	4	6.8	24	7.2
Retired	116	42.2	10	16.9	126	37.7
Disabled ^a	16	5.8	5	8.5	21	6.3
Other	7	2.5	6	10.2	13	3.9
Undisclosed	14	5.1	1	1.7	15	4.5
Sexual orientation						
Heterosexual	210	76.4	50	84.7	260	77.8
LGBTQ+	50	18.2	8	13.6	58	17.4
Undisclosed	15	5.5	1	1.7	16	4.8
Other victimizations	150	54.5	40	67.8	190	56.9
Lived in a boarding school	83	30.9	5	8.5	88	26.8

^aThe person was receiving a disability allowance and was neither employed nor retired.

There was a statistically significant difference in age between men and women, with female victims being younger than male victims, $t(327) = 3.79$, $p < .001$. Compared to men (54.5%), more women (67.8%) reported additional victimization experiences during their lifetime; however, in this case, the gender differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.11$, $df = 2$, $p = .078$). Among those who reported additional victimization, 28.9% indicated that their first victimization experience occurred before the sexual abuse ($n = 54$), while 48.1% experienced other types of victimization simultaneously ($n = 90$). Some informants reported that their first abuse experience was the sexual abuse, but they disclosed other victimizations afterward ($n = 43$; 23.0%). Lastly, men were more likely than women to have attended a boarding school during childhood ($\chi^2 = 13.8$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$).

Characteristics of the abuse

Most victims (92.0%) had experienced sexual abuse with physical contact (with or without penetration). Both men and women reported similar rates of penetrative abuse (23.7% vs. 20.4%). On average, both men and women reported experiencing abuse starting around age 11. The abuse tended to cease by age 13 for men, while for women, it extended beyond the age of 13. However, no statistical differences were found between men and women regarding this variable. With respect to the frequency of the abuse, 70.1% ($n = 234$) of the sample reported having experienced more than one episode. There was no statistically significant difference in frequency between genders. See Table 2.

Regarding the specific characteristics of the abuse shown in Table 3, 12.0% ($n = 40$) of victims reported that the abuser used their faith in God to justify the abuse or as a strategy to commit it. One example comes in the testimony provided by victim 82 who stated, “He told me that the friendship of Jesus with the apostles was like that, that what we were doing was something pure.” The narrative of the victims revealed that the spiritual authority of the perpetrator also operated as an implicit element of the abusive relationship. Victim 395 wrote in a letter to his abuser: “For years, I have idolized you. You fascinated me so much that, foolishly, I accepted the version of your sexuality that you presented to me. How could I doubt you, your intentions, you who were the representative of God?”

In addition, participants were asked if they knew of other victims of the same perpetrator and, if so, how many victims they thought there would be. The mean number of victims reported by participants was 7.48 ($SD = 28.4$), meaning that, on average, participants believed that their abuser likely had seven more victims of sexual abuse, apart from themselves. Their belief stemmed from either witnessing such incidents or hearing rumors about

Table 2. General characteristics of the abuse.

Variable	Men (n=275)		Women (n=59)		Total (N=334)		Statistics	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	χ^2 (df)	Cramer's V
Type of abuse							3.01 (3)	.094
No physical contact	5	1.8	3	5.1	8	2.3		
Physical contact	199	72.4	38	64.4	237	71.0		
Penetration	56	20.4	14	23.7	70	21.0		
Undisclosed	15	5.5	4	6.8	19	5.7		
Age of abuse onset							27.1(6)***	.285
Mean (SD)	11.5 (3.85)		11.9 (7.02)		11.5 (4.56)			
0-5 years old	1	0.4	4	6.8	5	1.5		
6-8 years old	48	17.5	15	25.4	63	18.9		
9-11 years old	98	35.6	18	30.5	116	34.7		
12-14 years old	91	33.1	8	13.6	99	29.6		
15-18 years old	29	10.5	9	15.3	38	11.4		
More than 18	5	1.8	4	6.8	9	2.7		
Undisclosed	3	1.1	1	1.7	4	1.2		
Age of abuse cessation							20.90(6)**	.250
Mean (SD)	13.0 (3.81)		13.5 (8.63)		13.1 (4.99)			
0-5 years old	0	0.0	2	3.4	2	0.6		
6-8 years old	22	8.0	10	16.9	32	9.6		
9-11 years old	69	25.1	18	30.5	87	26.0		
12-14 years old	110	40.0	13	22.0	123	36.8		
15-18 years old	60	21.8	10	16.9	70	21.0		
More than 18	11	4.0	5	8.5	16	4.8		
Undisclosed	3	1.1	1	1.7	4	1.2		
Duration (years)	1.60 (2.11)		1.60 (3.96)		1.60 (2.53)			
Mean (SD)								
Frequency							5.15 (3)	.124
Once	71	25.8	16	27.1	87	26.0		
More than one episode	119	43.3	33	55.9	152	45.5		
Chronic ^a	73	26.5	9	15.3	82	24.6		
Undisclosed	12	4.4	1	1.7	13	3.9		
Location of the abuse ^b							8.23 (2)*	.157
Unrelated spaces	28	10.2	14	23.7	42	12.6		
Church-related spaces	239	86.9	44	74.6	283	84.7		
Undisclosed	8	2.9	1	1.7	9	2.7		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

^a“Chronic” was defined as abuses that occurred persistently or repeatedly over an extended period of two years, reflecting a pattern of sustained and recurring incidents.

^bExamples of church-related places include religious schools and parishes.

Table 3. Specific characteristics of the abuse.

Variable	Men (n=275)		Women (n=59)		Total (N=334)		Statistics	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	χ^2 (df)	Cramer's V
Use of faith in God ^a	32	11.6	8	13.6	40	12.0	0.47 (2)	.037
Other victims (known or seen)	206	74.9	37	62.7	243	72.8	5.33 (2)	.126
Estimated number of victims	7.95 (30.7)		5.38 (14.0)		7.48 (28.4)			
Mean (SD)								
More than one perpetrator	17	6.2	3	5.1	20	6.0	2.52 (2)	.086
Number of perpetrators	1.05 (0.28)		1.10 (0.54)		1.06 (0.34)			
Mean (SD)								
Known by others ^b	122	44.4	21	35.6	143	42.8	2.31 (2)	.083

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

^aFaith was used to commit the abuse.

^bThe victim believes other adults were aware that the abuse was happening.

them. No statistically significant differences were found in the mean number of other victims reported by men and women, $t(314) = 0.62$ $p = .535$.

Concerning the number of aggressors, 6.0% reported being victims of more than one person during the abuse. No statistically significant differences were found in the mean number of aggressors between men and women, $t(331) = -1.09$ $p = .276$. Lastly, 42.8% of respondents believed that other people must have been aware of the abuse.

Consequences of the abuse

As far as consequences of the abuse, the 42 distinct outcomes assessed, were categorized into five groups: emotional and behavioral problems, relationship problems, functional problems, sexual problems, and cognitive problems (see Table 4). More than three-quarters of the victims (77.5%; $n = 259$) reported one or more of the listed consequences and attributed them to the sexual abuse.

Emotional and behavioral problems were the most frequently reported. This is reflected in the following testimonies: “I have felt dirty my entire life” (V169) and “[m]y life has been a series of emotional failures and an inability to live my own life with a certain happiness. I have been unable to be minimally happy” (V72). Another victim said, “I have struggled with alcoholism since the age of 12 because it was my escape. I knew that every violation, though painful, would be more bearable with alcohol” (V142). Feelings of self-blame were also common. Victim 181 said, “You spend your life wondering why you took the stairs instead of taking the door on the right, slamming it shut on the aggressor.” Another victim indicated that because of “[t]he guilt I carry for not reporting it at the time, I can’t help but wonder how many victims there were subsequently” (V96). Some victims also reported suicide attempts. For example, victim 326 reported:

When I separated, I fell into a very deep depression with a suicide attempt. They found me and resuscitated me. I was admitted, and while I was in the hospital, all of this came to light. It turned out that I was marked by this trauma.

The second most frequent type of problems revolved around relationships. Some victims explained how sexual abuse had affected their relationships in adulthood, including their conception of love and sexual life:

I fall in love with a person, and I leave. [. . .] I have a daughter out there, I haven’t officially recognized her. [. . .] I don’t know what love is; I’ll get used to it for maybe a year, a year and a half, and then I abandon my partner. (V301)

Another victim stated, “I find sexual relationships disgusting. I haven’t had sexual relations in ten years” (V18). Victim 194 said, “I don’t know how to

Table 4. Consequences of the abuse.

Variable	Physical contact (no penetration) (n= 237)		Physical contact (penetration) (n= 70)		Total (n= 307)		Statistics		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	χ^2 (df)	Cramer's V	OR
Emotional and behavioral problems	143	60.3	61	87.1	204	66.4	17.40 (1)***	.238	4.46 (2.11-9.40)
Relationship problems	90	38.0	49	70.0	139	45.3	22.40 (1)***	.270	3.81 (2.15-6.77)
Functional problems	75	31.6	47	67.1	122	39.7	28.40 (1)***	.304	4.41 (2.50-7.80)
Sexual problems	59	24.9	38	54.3	97	31.6	21.6 (1)***	.265	3.58 (2.06-6.24)
Cognitive problems	29	12.2	15	21.4	44	14.3	3.72 (1)	.110	1.96 (0.98-3.90)
Negative impact on faith in God ^a	107	51.7	37	58.9	144	53.3	0.96 (1)	.059	1.33 (0.75-2.35)
Negative impact on trust in the Church ^a	151	74.4	47	72.3	198	73.9	0.11 (1)	.020	0.89 (0.48-1.69)
Apostatized or in the process ^a	27	20.3	10	28.6	37	22.0	1.10 (1)	.081	1.57 (0.67-3.66)
Therapy ^a	67	45.0	41	78.8	108	53.7	17.8 (1)***	.298	4.56 (2.18-9.56)
Mental illness diagnosis ^a	35	34.7	22	56.4	57	40.7	5.52 (1)*	.199	2.44 (1.15-5.19)
Psychiatric medication ^b	29	39.2	22	64.7	51	47.2	6.09 (2)*	.237	2.84 (1.22-6.62)

Although 334 individuals were interviewed, only the cases of abuse with physical contact have been taken into account in the table owing to the limited number of cases in the “no physical contact” group.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

^aMissing values have been excluded from the analysis of these items. Therefore, the total number of individuals in each group may vary.

^bThis item only considered those who had a mental illness diagnosis. Therefore, the percentages have been calculated not in relation to the total sample but rather in relation to those who confirmed having received a psychiatric diagnosis.

maintain a relationship that isn't sadomasochistic. From ages 12 to 18, I always had extremely intense sexual relationships."

Spiritual damage in the form of a negative impact on faith in God and/or trust in the Catholic Church affected a significant share of victims ($n = 208$; 62.3%). This was put eloquently by victim V221:

Not only did they steal my childhood, but they also stole my faith. I couldn't believe in any of it anymore, I couldn't, because for me, if God existed [...] it wasn't normal that He would have allowed all that.

Another victim said, "If there were a God, He couldn't allow these people to act with impunity. I had been raised in the Catholic religion, and this changed me completely" (V195). As a quantitative measure of the impact of the abuse in the religiosity and spiritual life of the victims, 5.4% of the total sample declared their apostasy from the Catholic Church and 5.9% have initiated procedures to do so. Finally, how deeply the experience of abuse has affected the identity of some victims can be seen clearly in the testimony of victim 72:

It will never be known what would have become of me, of my life, without my experience of abuse, and it will never be known how much of the mutilated being I have felt is due to it. I can only speculate that I have been the shadow of what could have been.

Specific characteristics of the abusive experience were found to be associated with the presence of particular problems reported by the victims. When comparing individuals who experienced a single episode of sexual abuse with those who reported "more than one episode" or "chronic abuse," an association was identified between the latter and the reporting of emotional and behavioral problems, $\chi^2 (1, N = 321) = 5.51, p < .05$, relationship problems, $\chi^2 (1, N = 321) = 6.96, p < .01$, functional problems, $\chi^2 (1, N = 321) = 4.16, p < .05$, and sexual problems, $\chi^2 (1, N = 321) = 9.13, p < .01$, but not cognitive problems, $\chi^2 (1, N = 321) = 0.12, p = .722$. Experiencing abuse from multiple aggressors was also statistically associated with relationship problems, $\chi^2 (1, N = 314) = 6.20, p < .05$, and sexual problems, $\chi^2 (1, N = 314) = 5.45, p < .05$.

As expected, there was an association between the severity of the abuse and the likelihood of victims reporting emotional and behavioral problems, relationship issues, functional impairments, and sexual difficulties. The strongest association was found between penetrative abuse and experiencing functional problems (Cramer's $V = .304$): victims reporting penetrative abuse were four times more likely than victims who experienced non-penetrative abuse to report functional problems. There were no other differences in outcomes between victims of penetrative and non-penetrative abuse.

Engaging in therapy was notably more prevalent among those who disclosed penetrative sexual abuse, with this association demonstrating moderate

strength (Cramer’s $V = .298$). Furthermore, individuals who reported penetrative abuse were two times more likely to have received a mental health diagnosis and almost three times more likely to be prescribed psychiatric medication than those who reported non-penetrative abuse.

Narratives of resilience were also found among the victims. Few participants’ accounts highlight their experiences of overcoming adversity, bouncing back from challenges, and showcasing resilience and growth:

I don’t think the abuse has affected my faith in God, as I continued actively participating in the Church, even in significant events (. . .) I am naturally optimistic, very active, and this has helped me overcome (. . .). I must have done something, and I’ve also been lucky with the people I’ve always been around.” (V218)

“It didn’t have any impact on me, fortunately. These cases can mess up your life, and fortunately, it didn’t mark me. It marked me to be sensitive to abuse and these types of situations, but it didn’t affect my personal life. (V124)

”As I was weak, I worked hard to become strong and ended up defending everyone (. . .). I withdrew by reading and writing.” (V182)

Sexual abuse disclosure

Most of the participants (79.0%) had formally reported the abuse prior to giving testimony to the VSU and, among those, measures were taken by the institution in 59.1% of cases, as Table 5 shows. Relocating the perpetrator was the action taken in 18.2% of cases where action was taken by the institution. Other measures (9.2%) consisted of informal actions such as “talking to the perpetrator” and “talking to the family of the victim,” relying solely on verbal warnings and discussions that often produced no tangible outcomes. Of the

Table 5. Disclosure and actions taken.

Variable	Men (<i>n</i> =275)		Women (<i>n</i> =59)		Total (<i>N</i> =334)		Statistics	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	χ^2 (<i>df</i>)	Cramer’s <i>V</i>
Disclosure (Yes)	215	78.2	49	83.1	264	79.0	0.87 (2)	.051
Actions taken ^a	127	46.2	26	44.1	153	45.8	0.21 (2)	.025
Type of action ^b							6.08 (4)	.193
Relocation of the perpetrator	23	18.1	5	19.2	28	18.3		
Relocation of the victim	2	1.6	1	3.8	3	2.0		
Prohibition of contact with minors	0	0.0	1	3.8	1	0.7		
Other	12	9.4	2	7.7	14	9.2		
Cover-up ^c	47	17.1	7	11.9	54	16.2	2.85 (2)	.092
Lack of transparency ^b	10	7.9	1	3.8	11	7.2	0.52 (1)	.058
Positive perception of the process ^b	29	24.0	4	16.7	33	22.8	3.09 (2)	.146
Confidentiality clause ^b	2	1.6	0	0.0	2	1.3	6.80 (2)	.143

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

^aIn this question, “actions” was a general term to refer to any kind of reaction to the disclosure, including formal and informal actions such as relocating the victims by sending them to another school.

^bWithin those who reported that actions were taken.

^cThe victim reports that a third person covered up the abuse.

victims, 16.2% stated that someone other than the perpetrator took actions to cover up the abuse, such as making threats to dissuade the victim from disclosing the abuse or expelling the victim from the religious school they attended. Regarding the process, 24.0% of informants in cases in which actions were taken expressed a positive perception of the process, while 7.2% perceived a lack of transparency. Additionally, two men reported having signed a confidentiality clause in compensation agreements that prohibited disclosure of the abuse.

Discussion

Discussion and systematic investigation of the issue of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Spain has historically been a profound taboo in the country. The present study is the result of efforts conducted by a victim support unit in response to a mandate issued by the Spanish Congress of Deputies to address this issue. Despite an awareness that sexual abuse by members of the Catholic Church was a concern in Spain that affected potentially around 1% of the country according to a groundbreaking study by López, Carpintero, et al. (1995), no official study of the characteristics or consequences of CSA at the hands of the clergy has been conducted until now.

A notable portion of the sample comprised older adults, many of whom are now retired, and whose childhood occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of them were pubescent boys at the time of the abuse, experiencing contact sexual abuse in Church-related spaces over an extended period, with a notable occurrence of penetration. These findings are consistent with observations from prior studies on sexual abuse by the clergy, both at the national level (Pereda & Segura, 2021) and internationally (Dressing et al., 2021). The demographic characteristics of the sample have been linked to the frequent attendance of boys at boarding schools in Spain, where experiences of sexual abuse were relatively common, particularly during the Franco dictatorship era (López, Hernández, et al., 1995).

The limited number of young victims found in this study may be associated with the diminishing social influence and decreasing number of believers in the Catholic Church (Pinto-Cortez, Garrido-Cabezas, et al., 2022). This has likely led to reduced access to children and young people, along with a weakened ability to keep cases secret and maintain silence.

More than half of the sample reported experiencing other forms of victimization as well. This result, while not surprising, aligns with findings from other Spanish samples of victims of sexual abuse by the clergy (Pereda & Segura, 2021). For almost one out of three victims, the sexual abuse was not their first experience of victimization. This suggests that victims may have been chosen because of their vulnerability (Böhm et al., 2014). Furthermore, the need to cope with additional forms of child

victimization may have intensified the distress and psychological harm reported by the participants. This aligns with previous studies that have demonstrated an association between increased maltreatment types and more severe abuse with increased trauma symptomatology (Clemmons et al., 2007).

The characteristics of the abusive experiences were found to be associated with a variety of emotional and behavioral problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, suicidality); relationship problems (e.g. social anxiety, problems with partner, social isolation); functional problems (e.g. sleep difficulties, somatic complaints, substance use); and sexual problems (e.g. unsatisfactory and dysfunctional sexuality, risky sexual behaviors).

Earlier research has indicated that abuses involving oral sex, anal, or vaginal penetration are noteworthy for their significant traumatic effects (Maciel & Basto-Pereira, 2020). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that the involvement of more than one perpetrator increases the level of distress (O'Leary et al., 2010).

The study of the consequences of sexual victimization by the clergy is relatively recent (Pinto-Cortez, Suárez-Soto, et al., 2022), and the observed consequences of this form of victimization appear to be similar to those expressed by victims of abuse by individuals outside the ecclesiastical context (Fogler et al., 2008). Moreover, the lack of credibility and the secrecy that accompany sexual victimization by religious figures can increase the risk of developing emotional problems such as depression, shame, and feelings of helplessness (McGraw et al., 2019). However, it should also be noted that some victims explicitly or implicitly narrate experiences of resilience and growth as a consequence of the prolonged process of healing. This post-traumatic growth seems to coexist with the discomfort and serious consequences of the experience, as demonstrated by other studies with samples from the same country and similar characteristics (Sicilia et al., 2024).

Most of the participants had formally reported the abuse to someone prior to sharing their experiences with the VSU and, in a few cases, actions were taken. It is important to note that disclosures are frequent when the perpetrator is a member of the Catholic Church (Latiff et al., 2024). While disclosure might initially have a positive impact on victims (Arata, 1998), the subsequent response from the institution is a crucial variable that influences the development of psychological symptoms (Ullman, 2002). In the context of the Catholic Church, the few responses collected appear to be characterized by the relocation of the perpetrator, limited transparency, and, in some instances, the imposition of confidentiality clauses. Most notably, in the majority of cases the Church did not take any action other than maintaining silence and secrecy. This is the reason why only a few actions are accounted for in the results of the study.

CSA in the Catholic church can be understood as a dynamic process encompassing the perpetrator, the victim, and the religious community. Beyond its parallels with the consequences of other forms of CSA, victimization of this type has been associated with notable symptoms of spiritual and belief-related crises (Pereda et al., 2022). In the present study, only one in ten participants reported that the abuser explicitly used faith in God as a tool to commit the abuse. However, this does not imply that the religious element was not a factor in the abusive relationship, given the context in which it occurred and the implicit religious authority of the perpetrator(s).

At the same time, over half of the participants acknowledged that the abuse had had a detrimental effect on their faith in God. Earlier research has raised concerns that a majority of victims perceive their connection with God as fractured (Smith, 2004). Notably, feelings of anger directed toward God have emerged as a powerful and consistent predictor of compromised mental well-being among victims of sexual abuse involving Church representatives (Pargament et al., 1998).

Furthermore, more than three-quarters of the participants indicated a detrimental effect on their trust in the Catholic Church. In addition, some of them have apostatized or are in the process of apostatizing, which involves renouncing their Catholic faith and obtaining an official declaration from the Church confirming apostasy. It is crucial to recognize that, as the perpetrator represents the Church, many victims perceive the entire institution as the source of harm. Consequently, they distance themselves from the Church to avoid the associated pain (McLaughlin, 1994).

Limitations

Limitations of the current study should be noted. The presented study relies on retrospective self-reports primarily from older adults, raising the possibility of recall bias. The accuracy of participants' recollection of abuse experiences might be compromised, impacting the precision of reported characteristics, frequency, and consequences of the abuse. In addition, those who opted to participate may differ systematically from those who did not, introducing potential self-selection bias that could affect the external validity of the results. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the characteristics and consequences of sexual abuse by the Catholic Church, contributing to the understanding of this complex issue. Future research should address these limitations to build on and refine our understanding of the nuanced dynamics involved in such cases.

Conclusion

The investigation into sexual abuse within the clergy in Spain, led by the Ombudsman of Spain, sheds light on a historically taboo subject. While prior awareness existed, the present study sets out the country's first official report on the controversial topic. The findings reveal a pattern of abuse primarily affecting pubescent boys, often linked to experiences in boarding schools, particularly during the period of the Franco dictatorship. The prevalence of other forms of victimization among the victims suggests a deliberate targeting of vulnerable individuals by most perpetrators. The study establishes a clear association between the abusive experiences and a range of problems reported by the victims, aligning with previous research that emphasizes the significance of the severity of sexual victimization. These findings underscore the need for specialized attention to address the unique aspects of clergy-related sexual abuse and acknowledge the profound impact on victims' spiritual and psychological well-being.

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Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee of the Ombudsman of Spain and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000, and 2013. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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