

From Married Priests USA

Sins of the father: The tears and recriminations when a young man discovers daddy is a Catholic priest

By Catherine Deveney

Ed Brown is 17 when he walks into a church and sees his father at the altar. It starts with a phone call, the kind he often made to the man he and his sister called by his first name even though he was their dad. Jim had visited them every few weeks throughout their childhood, come on holidays with them, sent them birthday cards and presents. Ed is never sure exactly what his dad does for a living. Some kind of property developer, he thinks. But that day Ed calls, Jim doesn't answer. A housekeeper does, giving the name of a parish church. Ed is confused. Can he speak to Jim? Father Jim isn't in, the housekeeper says.

Fifty miles up the motorway, Ed drives, having passed his test just weeks before. A church door ... a wooden pew ... a familiar stranger. The internal bomb detonating. He does not shout out when he sees his father wearing vestments like a uniform. A soldier's braid, a chef's whites ... uniforms are badges that say something of who you are. But these priestly vestments voice a lie. They say his father is a celibate man who devotes himself exclusively to God. Ed is proof his father is not. "It really, really freaked me out to see him dressed like that. It's like ... imagine going down to your basement in the middle of the night, looking through the window and seeing your dad in robes performing some sort of ritual. It really felt like that. It was just so awful to see. It was horrible."

Ten years later, sitting in his work canteen in London, Ed is the picture of control. He is a young, stylish media professional, quiet and articulate. But back then, he isn't in control. His heart pounds throughout the service. "Part of me just thought it was a really cool thing to do," he explains. "That was the main motivation. I think it was just to see it with my own eyes. Part of it was motivated by anger. There was a small part of me that did secretly want him to see me. It was an act of rebellion I guess."

When the service ended, rebellion evaporated. "Most of the time in the Catholic church the priest stands at the door when everyone leaves and in this place, the doors were quite narrow. He was stood there saying goodbye to everyone and then I just had a real panic. I thought, I don't want him to see me, for his sake as well as mine, because he'd probably have a heart attack. And this is the best part. I walked right through. He didn't see me. I guess he never imagined for a second that I would be there."

It sums their relationship up: a father who was blind to his own child's needs unless it was convenient. He appeared and he disappeared. He was not a mysterious figure, just an absent one. Jim even took Ed and his friend to a football match once. Ed loved him. "I think a father who is only around every week or two really reaps the rewards of their

children's affections. I loved it when he came round. I'd be really excited and we'd have a great time and he could make us laugh like no-one I've ever met. He had a really silly sense of humour, which is partly why it was such a shock to me when I found out. I was brought up a Catholic and he was so much the antithesis of what I imagined priests to be."

His parents were clearly together in a relationship and Ed's sister, Sophie, was born seven years later. Ed just accepted Mum and Dad didn't live together. The relationship stopped being intimate, he thinks, when he was about 13. "I always thought he loved her more than she loved him and that the reason they didn't live together was because my mum didn't want him, that she didn't love him enough. I thought he wanted them to be together and she didn't. Now I know that's not true."

In fact, his mother had been part of a group of friends, some of whom were priests who were falling in love and leaving the priesthood. "She assumed Jim would do the same, especially when she got pregnant. When he didn't, I think she was very hurt. She always says she didn't feel angry for herself but for me. She felt he betrayed me and abandoned me."

In fact, she told Jim she didn't want to see him again and he disappeared for the first three years of his son's life. But gradually the relationship resumed, though Jim always made it clear he wouldn't leave the priesthood. "He always said he wanted to stay and change things from within That's a line that I think my mum fell for at the time but to me it's pretty obvious. That's a bullshit line to get yourself off the hook."

SEX SCANDALS ARE not exclusive to the Catholic church. But Catholicism seems to struggle more than most churches with human sexuality. Partly, that's because few are so vocal about their moral standards while remaining so silent about their failures to live up to them. But Catholicism has also historically imposed a kind of moral hierarchy around sex, with celibacy admired as the pinnacle of achievement. That presents a problem. A reverence for creation and family life are also part of Catholic culture. How can you achieve that without sex?

"The concept of sex in the Catholic church is distorted and skewed," argues Richard Sipe, an American psychotherapist who spent 18 years as a Benedictine monk and priest. "There's a very narrow range that is non-sinful." Now married with a son, Sipe is known internationally for his research, having spent a lifetime studying patterns of both homosexual and heterosexual activity among priests. In 1990, he published a 25-year study suggesting that, at any one time, around 50 per cent of priests will have been sexually active in the previous three years. It is a figure that has been replicated in studies throughout the world – in Spain, Holland, Switzerland and South Africa. Father Jim is simply one small thread in a worldwide tapestry.

In the same way the church speaks out against birth control while many followers practice it in their own lives, so too it upholds a celibate priesthood while many of its priests establish sex lives. We have become used to the sexual shenanigans of priests

on our front pages. In Ireland, there was Bishop Eamon Casey and his secret son, then Casey's friend, Father Michael Cleary, who fathered a whole family of children with his "housekeeper".

In Scotland, Bishop Roddy Wright ran off with a parishioner in 1996 and also had a son from an earlier affair. More recently, we have had Monsignor Joseph Creegan who conducted an 18-year affair with one woman then dumped her for a second, and Father Jock Dalrymple who was accused by a female parishioner of having an affair with her. Then there was Father Gerry Nugent who admitted to sex with the murdered Polish student Angelika Kluk and to using prostitutes; Father Anthony Sweeney who became embroiled in a homosexual blackmail plot; Father Roddy MacNeil who got his married cousin pregnant and was accused of a second affair; and Father Jim Lawlor who resigned after being found half naked in his Glasgow church surrounded by sex toys.

"The majority of clergy are unable to deal with sexual deprivation in healthy ways," says Sipe. It is true, he acknowledges, that celibacy has been used throughout history as a means of increasing spirituality. But it is a distortion to assume a person becomes more spiritual simply because you force them to be celibate. "Part of this distortion is that celibacy is not used within the Catholic priesthood for spirituality but for control: the control of the bishop over his priest, the control of the pope over his bishops. Celibacy is an external obedience."

Celibacy was only imposed on the Catholic clergy 1,000 years into the church's history. It is a discipline not a dogma, and could, we are told, be changed at any time. But the church's historical attitude to sex perhaps also illustrates its struggle with women – the apparent difficulty in finding any middle ground between Madonna and temptress – which is summed up by St Augustine claiming in the fifth century: "Nothing is so powerful in dragging the spirit of a man downwards as the caresses of a woman." A century later, Pope Gregory the Great was declaring that sexual desire was sinful. It was in the 20th century that a different stance emerged. In the 1930s Pious XI said sex could be a good and holy thing while in the 1960s John XXIII said marriage was equal to celibacy. But these relatively recent pronouncements have not overturned a culture that equated sex with sin, a culture ingrained over many hundreds of years.

It is estimated that between three and six per cent of priests have sex with minors. Some might argue that paedophiles simply target the church as an easy place to hide. But is it also possible to make a connection between sexual repression and deviance? Yes, argues Sipe. "All the studies – way back to Freud – show that the inability to have a legitimate sexual outlet is one of the factors in leading people to have an illegitimate one. The church throws people into situations where they are sexually deprived and don't really have the training or motivation to be celibate."

Crucially, studies have suggested that the arrested sex lives of priests leads to psychological immaturity. As far back as 1972, a psychological study of the American priesthood by Kennedy and Heckler was commissioned by US Bishops. It concluded that two out of three priests were psychosexually immature, explains Sipe, and that

between eight and 16 per cent were considered "mal-developed". Sipe's research has led him to the same conclusion. "In fact, I would place the proportion higher from my ongoing experiences with sexually offending clergy and the bishops and officials who cover up offences. Inability to take personal responsibility is certainly one aspect of the underdevelopment of clergy. Placing organisational image – and hiding behind it – above personal integrity is a childish manoeuvre and defence. It is pervasive in the clerical culture."

Such immaturity, he says, leads priests to believe they are morally superior and therefore not obliged to follow rules to the letter. "Over and over again I have seen a number of basically good priests use women for the sex education that is absent and inadequate in all seminaries I know of. Some priests, after they experience enough sex to reassure their male identity – to their level of growth and development which is mostly adolescent – settle themselves comfortably into the male-dominant system where they execute informed dominance over women. Others have to repeat the pattern of reassurance over most of a lifetime while others settle into a long-lasting arrangement with a woman."

Father Jim's long-lasting arrangement was never revealed. "The older I get, the more intrigued I get about how you can pull that off for so long, leading a double life," says his son. "I am just baffled by his inability to do the right thing." But there is no consistent guidance within the church advising what the right thing is in such situations. No rules governing resignations or parental responsibility or financial support. Each case is dealt with individually by bishops – usually behind closed doors.

Father Jim always said that when he retired, he would at least tell his family. Now he has retired, he thinks secrecy should prevail.

"I think his mother died about ten years ago and she never knew," says Ed. "My mum said it was because she would have been devastated if she'd known. I just think it's pathetic to be afraid of disappointing your parents because they are the people who you can disappoint and will love you no matter what. It's pathetic ... the grown man who is afraid to tell his mum because she will disapprove."

If that sounds angry, or bitter, Ed is unaware of feeling such emotion. In fact, the older he gets, the more numb he feels towards his father. He's clearly close to his mother but ironically, that closeness makes it almost inevitable he will blame her more. He has no real relationship with his father and therefore no real expectations of him. "I blame my mum more for not telling me," he admits. I don't see what I did to deserve being kept in the dark. I think I had the right to know." Has he told his mum that? "Yes." She must have been upset. "Yeah, she got really upset." But it ended OK because they texted one another the next day. He never even bothered having that conversation with his father. "I'm not bothered that he didn't tell me because he's clearly unable to be honest with anyone. He's too weak."

It's only in the last couple of years that Ed's mother has found another partner. She

should have done so earlier, he thinks. "She said one of the reasons was that it would just have been too confusing for us, which it would have been, but we'd have got over it." But how was his mother to know that? And how many men willingly take on a woman with two young children? So many damaged lives. His father says he loves Ed and Sophie. But the older Ed gets, the more hollow it sounds. "The reality doesn't support the statement."

Ed feels no hostility, no desire for revenge. Jim is a really nice guy, he says. Lovely. But he could be talking about his next-door neighbour. "Maybe I am repressing it and need therapy to acknowledge it but at the moment I genuinely don't feel anything any more. I mentioned that to my sister and she got upset about it. She said yeah you do, you love him and I said I genuinely don't think I do. I don't think about what he's doing. If something good happens I don't think, oh I'll let him know. When I'm down about something, I don't think, oh I'll give him a call." In fact, his feelings about Jim are utterly neutral, though the older he gets, the more he realises how little he respects him. It's hard to imagine a greater punishment for his father than that. His son doesn't care enough to even dislike him.

A few months ago. Ed's father wrote to him. "It was about two pages and it spoke a little bit about the guilt that he feels. He doesn't really know if we feel damaged or betrayed and the letter was basically an invitation to open up a dialogue about it." Ed will meet with his dad soon but only because he doesn't want to regret missing that opportunity later in life. He finds himself curiously indifferent to the prospect of conversation. "It's weird because it would be far more interesting, and far more likely to achieve a resolution, if I felt some kind of anger because then you go through the storm and out the other side. But I have no real desire to confront him or demand some explanation." Jim took him for lunch when Ed first found out and said he was glad his son now knew the truth but Ed found he couldn't really discuss it. "I prefer not to think of him as the priest. I prefer to think of him as the guy we saw once a week."

As an institution, the church has always thought it best to cover up scandal, oblivious to the fact that for most of its flock, the biggest scandal is cover-up itself. For Ed, his father's hypocrisy destroyed any religious faith he had. He still believes in a higher power, but he no longer goes to church. "That's something I'd say to him: you destroyed my Catholicism. I can't go into a church. Every time I stepped inside and saw a member of the clergy, that's all I would think about. It would take me back to when I first found out."

Perhaps his father has lived to regret his choices? "No, I've never got that impression. He is very passionate about being a priest and I would conclude that being a priest is more important to him than his children. That's something I'll ask him. He's going to deny it but I won't accept it."

Ed's girlfriend says he has trust issues. Ed thinks she's right. If someone could get away with leading the kind of double life his father did for 17 years, then a person could easily get away with having an affair. "I'm always aware of that as a possibility. It's good in a

way that I won't take someone for granted but I could end up driving myself insane if I was with someone who made me feel insecure." He questions why he's like that. "Could it be to do with the fact that for 17 years of my life, I was lied to about something by my parents? It probably did have that effect because I think anything is possible. People are capable of any kind of deceit. That's what it proves to me ... people are capable of anything."

For Richard Sipe, change in the Catholic church is inevitable, though not necessarily imminent. "The problem of change is a problem of power and control. The church must insist on the intrinsic evil of any sexual activity outside marriage – an untenable and ridiculous position – or the house of cards falls." And if it doesn't change? "We are developing a time bomb that will explode in the future." For Ed Brown, the bomb has already exploded. Yet the fallout has created a defiance that is almost uplifting. "If I'm being totally honest," he writes in an e-mail, "I think it's pretty cool being alive knowing you were never meant to exist. There's something incredibly life affirming about it." There can be few more powerful signals that you exist against the odds than being able to say: "My dad, the Catholic priest."

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