

Abuse scandals challenge seminarians to strive to be the best priests they can be

When seminarian Ryan Beaupre first heard and read about the clergy abuse scandals in the Catholic Church in the U.S. and elsewhere, he was horrified. Then he was emboldened.

“I was disgusted. That’s how I felt,” said Beaupre, referring to former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the retired archbishop of Washington who was accused of sexually abusing children and seminarians over many years. “I was horrified that this happened and I couldn’t understand how we could have fallen so far. How come no one was doing anything to make him stop?”

Beaupre, who grew up in Rycroft, north of Grande Prairie, hopes to become a priest of the Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan. He was just entering his third year at St. Joseph Seminary when news broke in August of a Pennsylvania report that identified 1,000 victims who were sexually abused by Catholic priests, detailed cover-ups by Church leaders, and eventually led Pope Francis to accept the resignation of Cardinal Donald Wuerl as archbishop of Washington.

Soon more stories of abuse began to emerge from other countries, including Chile, Germany and Australia. Although the reports came from thousands of kilometres away, Beaupre – one of 43 students at the Edmonton seminary -- feels their effects.



Seminarian Ryan Beaupre

"I don't see it as just a problem of one or two bishops," Beaupre said. "We as Christian people don't live in a vacuum. If it affects one part of the body of Christ, it affects us all, right? It has affected me personally and it continues to affect me every day."

What about the public's view of these future priests? Beaupre said their reputation has taken a hit.

"People are looking for answers," Beaupre said. "And my position is, 'Do you think these fallen priests, is this what the Church is supposed to look like?' The answer is no. It's an abuse of it. This is not what the Church is supposed to look like."

Instead of weakening, Beaupre said the abuse scandals motivated him – and other seminarians – to become stronger leaders in the Church. Taking a cue from Bishop Robert Barron, the acclaimed author and theologian, Beaupre said he's fighting back and will do his part to ensure abuse never occurs on his watch.

"This is a call to arms. We must strive to purify the Church," Beaupre said. "The Church isn't defined by sin. We don't abandon the Church because of Judas. It really made me aware of this. I'm not perfect either. The crisis makes me focus more on my own vocation. What I can do as an individual is to be the priest I can be, so that I will not fail or cause scandal."

Today's seminaries are fundamentally informed by an apostolic exhortation written by Pope St. John Paul II in 1992 called *Pastores dabo vobis* ("I will give you shepherds"). The document was the result of a Synod of Bishops in 1990 about the formation of priests. In it, John Paul II outlined four pillars in which young men are formed for the priesthood: intellectual formation, pastoral formation, spiritual formation, and human formation. Instead of dissuading future priests, Father Seamus Hogan of St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto said the revelations of abuse should propel young seminarians to go after the heart of Jesus Christ.

They should also encourage seminary formators and teachers, like himself, to play their role in preparing these men for the life of priesthood.

"You don't leave Jesus because of Judas," said Hogan, an associate professor at St. Augustine's. "Something like this should encourage men who are faithful, who desire holiness, who want to help people get to heaven.... We don't need less holy men in the priesthood, we need more."

What has helped Beaupre personally, in the wake of the current abuse scandals, is the support of his Grouard-McLennan Archdiocese and Archbishop Gerard Pettipas. Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith also met with St. Joseph seminarians last month to talk about how they were doing.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has updated its abuse prevention guidelines, and they include a greater emphasis on pastoral and human development to prevent “ill-prepared” candidates from entering the priesthood or religious professions.

Father Stephen Hero, rector of St. Joseph Seminary, noted that seminary formation has changed.

“I think some very wounded people or those with arrested development could have ended up at times in formation, but years ago, formators would not have been equipped to determine or deal with this as well as today,” Hero said. “Today, seminarians are out in the community more, learn about themselves in a more systematic and intentional way.”



Father Stephen Hero

As an example, Hero noted that in the past, family violence and sexual abuse were not things that were discussed openly in society, which made it possible for young men who suffered silently to enter the seminary without dealing with their childhood traumas.

Many faithful people have been shaken by the news of clerical abuse, including seminarians.

Even among the students under his care, Hero said it could not have been easy for them to return to their academic studies after the continuous outbreak of scandal.

“I would say that I know what they are going through,” said Hero. “When I began philosophy as a seminarian in 1991, it was around the time of the scandals at Mount Cashel (in Newfoundland). As painful as it was to hear those shocking

stories as a young man, it also made me want to be the priest that I could be.”

Before a man steps inside a seminary, he must provide proof of recommendation from his vocations director or bishop and a criminal record check. He must also be evaluated by a professional psychologist.

Beaupre said the seminary examines with all aspects of the person, as well as emotions and sexuality.

Seminarians are often assigned to a spiritual director with whom they meet on a weekly basis. The seminarian, in order to be aware of his own strengths and weaknesses, must provide evidence of integrating the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of formation.

Seminaries often have a human formation counsellor who co-ordinates students' psychological assessments and works with other psychologists to create part of a yearly evaluation to be approved by the rector at the end of each year.

Benedictine Father Matthew Gerlich is rector at Christ the King Seminary in Mission, B.C. As formators of the future priests for the Archdiocese of Vancouver, all counsellors, spiritual directors and professors there take their job very seriously, Gerlich said. By living in community with the seminarians, it ensures that no candidate will slip through the cracks.

“When I’m making a decision as rector, there is a lot of consultation involved,” he said. “It’s not just from what I’ve seen, but from what a lot of people have seen from (the seminarian), including from lay people.”

Each candidate is evaluated according to feedback from professors, spiritual directors, counsellors, and even pastors and lay people where each candidate is required to do apostolic work in a parish community.

Beaupre noted that seminary formation can only do so much. “It gives us the tools, but if you’re not virtuous underneath, the Holy Spirit has nothing to work with.”

-With files from Canadian Catholic News