

MONTH 1: JANUARY

Understanding Power and Consent: Why Relationships With Clergy Are Different

[Content Warning: This article discusses clergy sexual misconduct in educational terms. No graphic details are included. Please read at your own pace and take breaks as needed. You can close this anytime.]

If you've experienced sexual contact with a clergy member, you may be carrying questions that keep you up at night: "Was it really abuse if I had feelings for them?" "Did I say yes when I should have said no?" "Why do I still feel so confused about what happened?" These questions make sense. And you're not alone in asking them. Let me share something that might bring clarity — not to tell you what to think, but to offer a framework that many survivors have found helpful.

THE CONCEPT OF FIDUCIARY RELATIONSHIPS

Some professional relationships involve what's called "fiduciary duty." This is a legal and ethical term that means: certain professionals have an obligation to put your interests above their own. For example:

- A doctor prioritizes your health over their personal desires
- A therapist focuses on your healing, not their own needs
- A financial advisor acts in your best interest, not theirs

When someone holds fiduciary duty over you, there's an inherent power imbalance. Many legal and ethical frameworks recognize that this power difference means true consent — the kind where both people are on equal footing — isn't possible in these relationships. Clergy relationships often function this way.

WHY CLERGY RELATIONSHIPS ARE DIFFERENT

When you seek guidance from a pastor, priest, or spiritual leader, you often share:

- Your deepest fears and doubts
- Your spiritual struggles
- Your family conflicts
- Your personal vulnerabilities

They hold:

- The ability to interpret scripture and God's will
- Influence over how your community sees you
- Access to your most private thoughts and feelings
- Moral and spiritual authority in your life

This creates what many professionals recognize as an unequal power dynamic. Some survivors describe it this way: "I trusted him with my soul. How could I say no when he held that much of me?" If that resonates, you're not imagining things.

WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU

If you experienced sexual contact with a clergy member, here's what some survivors have found helpful to consider: ****Your feelings were real**** If you had genuine feelings for this person, that doesn't mean what happened was okay. Feelings can exist alongside exploitation. ****"Yes" doesn't always mean consent**** In relationships with power imbalances, "yes" might mean: • "I'm afraid of what happens if I say no" • "I'm confused about whether this is allowed" • "I trust you, so I'm following your lead" • "You're framing this as spiritual, so it must be okay" Many legal frameworks recognize this complexity. ****You're allowed to change how you see it**** Maybe you called it a "relationship" for years. Maybe you're only now questioning whether it was something else. Both perspectives can be true at different points in your healing. You're allowed to reframe your experience as you learn more about power dynamics.

WHERE THIS UNDERSTANDING COMES FROM

Many states have laws specifically addressing this issue: • California recognizes clergy sexual contact as professional misconduct • Minnesota criminalizes sexual conduct between clergy and congregants • Wisconsin, Texas, Iowa, and other states have similar statutes These laws exist because lawmakers recognized: the power held by clergy makes equal consent extremely difficult, if not impossible. This doesn't mean every state sees it this way. And it doesn't mean you have to see it this way. But if you're questioning whether what happened "counts" as abuse — these legal frameworks suggest: you're not alone in that question, and there are valid reasons to wonder.

WHAT YOU MIGHT DO WITH THIS INFORMATION

There's no right or wrong way to respond to this. Some survivors: • Feel relief: "Finally, someone explained why I felt so powerless" • Feel angry: "I was manipulated and I didn't even know it" • Feel confused: "I still don't know what to call it" • Feel validated: "I'm not crazy for thinking this was wrong" All of these reactions are normal. You don't have to decide right now: • Whether to call it abuse • Whether to report it • Whether to pursue legal action • Whether to tell anyone else You can sit with this information and see how it feels.

IF YOU WANT TO EXPLORE FURTHER

Some survivors find it helpful to: • Talk to a trauma-informed therapist about power dynamics • Read more about fiduciary relationships • Connect with other adult survivors of clergy abuse • Simply sit with this new framework and see if it fits There's no timeline. No pressure. No "should."

YOU GET TO DECIDE

Whether you: • Call this abuse or not • Report or stay private • Pursue justice or focus on healing • Tell your story or keep it to yourself ...is entirely up to you. This article simply offers language that some survivors have found helpful. If it doesn't fit your experience, that's okay too.

GROUNDING REMINDER: If reading this brought up difficult emotions, here's a simple grounding technique: • Notice 5 things you can see • Notice 4 things you can touch • Notice 3 things you can hear • Notice 2 things you can smell • Notice 1 thing you can taste You're safe right now. You're in control of this moment.

RESOURCES (You're not required to use these — they're here if helpful): For crisis support: • RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673 (24/7, confidential) • Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 For information (no pressure to act): • Chapter 1 of "Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse" explores fiduciary duty in depth (Survivors Network): snapnetwork.org **A gentle reminder:** You are not responsible for what happened to you. You are not required to heal on anyone's timeline. You deserve support, whatever you decide. Take care of yourself. ❤️ --- 📖 If you'd like more information about power dynamics, legal rights, and healing paths, the book is available at your preferred retailer. [No pressure. Just an option if you want it.]