



Confronting Rhetorical Violence in Response to the Catholic Sex Abuse Crisis

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Abstract

In response to the Roman Catholic sexual abuse crisis, many Catholics have disaffiliated from the church. To stop members from leaving, Catholic bishops have utilized language that is rhetorically similar to the language used by perpetrators of domestic violence. This essay highlights some prevalent rhetorical devices used by Catholic leaders (i.e., ambiguity, bracketing, justification, and excuse) and shows how they are similar to the language domestic abusers will use to gaslight and control their victims. Then, four principles of a trauma-informed rhetoric are offered to combat the existing abusive rhetoric and to facilitate the cultural shifts needed if the Roman Catholic Church is going to heal.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Sex Abuse Crisis, Roman Catholicism, Trauma, Domestic Violence

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States has been impacted by a significant decrease in those affiliated with the church. According to recent studies done by the PEW Research Center, “the share of Americans who are Catholic declined from 24% in 2007 to 21% in 2014.” Further, “13% of all U.S. adults are former Catholics” (Masci and Smith 2018). Of course, there is no single reason driving this disaffiliation (Bullivant et al. 2019). However, it is widely agreed that the scandal caused by the systemic sexual abuse of minors perpetrated and facilitated by Catholic clergy (hereafter, systemic

CPSA) is partially, if not primarily, responsible for this trend in disaffiliation.¹ For example, a 2019 Gallup poll studying U.S. Catholics found that 37 percent of participants said that “recent news about sexual abuse of young people by priests” had them personally debating whether to stay Catholic (Jones 2019). This was a 15-point increase from the initial survey conducted in 2002, suggesting that the decline in the number of Catholics might be driven by systemic CPSA along with the Catholic leadership’s handling of this crisis. The connection between the scandal and disaffiliation is demonstrated by the way that Catholic leaders at all levels of the church have responded to systemic CPSA, treating it as a reason to leave. While other religious communities continue to be affected by systemic CPSA and its detrimental impact, this paper focuses on the Roman Catholic Church and its distinct rhetorical culture that facilitates violence (Milford 2023, 1). Popes, cardinals, archbishops, presbyters, and many other Catholic leaders have addressed systemic CPSA and its lasting impact. Apart from varying degrees of taking responsibility, offering apologies, and promising improvement, Catholic leaders often deliver their responses in a way that either explicitly or implicitly attempts to stem the tide of the traumatized Catholic population from leaving the Church.² It is this aspect of the Catholic Church’s response to systemic CPSA that we wish to examine.

The purpose of this essay is two-fold. First, we wish to draw attention to a troubling similarity between some of the rhetoric employed by Roman Catholic leaders and the rhetoric often used by people who perpetrate domestic violence and intimate partner violence. We will highlight this similarity by first describing the role of rhetoric in domestic violence and intimate partner violence, focusing on a few of the most utilized rhetorical devices. In this initial section, we will rely heavily on the work of counselor Lundy Bancroft. In his book, *Why Does He Do That?*, Bancroft recounts insights gained from decades of clinical experience treating abusers. He presents a clear picture of an abuser’s mentality and the rhetoric and narratives they use to exert their control over their victims.

Next, we will show how Catholic leaders often employ those same rhetorical devices to pacify and control the traumatized Catholic population. It is beyond the scope of a single essay to do a systematic analysis of all the official and unofficial responses that have been delivered by Catholic leaders. Rather, this essay will highlight the writing of a few prominent Catholic leaders whose rhetoric is indicative of the larger Catholic culture. Specifically, we will see how Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, as well as American bishops Timothy Dolan and Robert Barron, have relied on language that not only prevents healing but further traumatizes the individuals affected by systemic CPSA. After offering accounts of these harmful uses of rhetoric, we will offer an alternative in the form of trauma-informed rhetoric

¹ “CPSA” stands for “clergy perpetrated sexual abuse.” In this essay, we will use this acronym to indicate what is often referred to as the “Catholic sex abuse crisis.” We use the word “systemic” because the crisis includes the systematic cover-up and perpetuation of the abuse undertaken by Catholic bishops.

² By “traumatized Catholic population,” we mean any Catholic who has been negatively impacted by exposure to systemic CPSA. Even for people who have experienced direct sexual assault, there is a wide variety of effects being experienced. But it is very clear that the people who are being traumatized by this abuse are not just the direct survivors of it. To be traumatized does not simply mean having PTSD. Traumatization is much broader than our general social understanding of it (Orsi 2017, 289; Turnbloom et al. 2022, 6–9).

that is intended to help those affected by the sex abuse crisis to heal and participate more fully in their faith.

In his study of abusive men, Bancroft repeatedly insists that abuse is not the result of an irrational, emotionally out-of-control individual. Rather, according to Bancroft, abuse is the result of hierarchical culture founded on unquestioned authority and control. He writes, “Abuse grows from attitudes and values, not feelings. The roots are ownership, the trunk is entitlement, and the branches are control” (2003, 75). Many Catholic leaders and scholars have rightly pointed out that systemic CPSA is a result of a clericalist culture that affords clergy a divine status to be exercised over the laity.³ However, as we will show, many Catholic leaders employ rhetoric that functions to protect the clericalist culture that affords them their power and status—the same power and status that lies at the heart of systemic CPSA. Our hope is that this essay can help people recognize manipulative language and seek to replace it with trauma-informed language that radically prioritizes those who have been harmed by systemic CPSA.

Rhetoric Facilitating Abuse

Before turning to a discussion of how Catholic leaders often utilize violent rhetoric in response to systemic CPSA, we will first describe what makes rhetoric so powerful and potentially dangerous. By focusing our attention on four common rhetorical devices (ambiguity, bracketing, excuse, and justification) and two of their most common results (gaslighting and reinforcing trauma bonds), we will show how rhetoric plays a powerful role in perpetuating abusive cultures.

Rhetoric and Power

“Rhetoric” is a broad term with multiple connotations. For the purposes of this essay, we will be following the definition offered by Potter and Wetherell (1987, 187): rhetoric is “the use of discourse to persuasive effect.” In other words, it is language that is used to effectively inform, motivate, and influence audiences. It is important to note that rhetoric is neither inherently positive nor negative. Depending on the speaker’s intention and/or the way rhetoric is interpreted, it can have a variety of consequences. While it might appear that one’s choice of words is of little consequence, rhetoric can have a great and lasting impact on issues of power and repression (Littlejohn and Foss 2009). For instance, the ways that we construct meaning, identity, and create knowledge are, in large part, a function of rhetoric. This is because the language that we use provides us with a framework for understanding the world around us (Blackburn 2016). The words that we use to describe or define something shape our perception of that entity. As such, rhetoric is an incredibly powerful tool, especially when used to manipulate the way others perceive and act in the world. This is why rhetorical analysis is not only a general dissection of language but is also a “method for uncovering and deconstructing cultural and political structures that function as forces of domination and repression” (Velasco, Campbell, and Henry 2016, 475). Rhetoric can be used to maintain

³ For example, Blaise Cardinal Cupich (2018), Archbishop of Chicago, has written that “The culture of self-protection, privilege and power that shielded abusers must be eradicated. It reflects a corrupt sense of entitlement without regard for honesty, accountability or, most important, the safety of young people and adults entrusted to our care.”

control and suppress resistance or to advocate for necessary change and empower individuals. In the words of Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan (2008, 101), “. . . activities of talking and writing are understood to actively constitute and reconstitute organizational reality. Rhetoric is therefore implicated in power struggles and the reproduction and recasting of inequality in organizations.”

Rhetorical Devices

Applied to the context of domestic violence and intimate partner violence, rhetoric plays a role in the control that abusers have over their relationships with others. In looking at the rhetoric commonly used in domestic violence and intimate partner violence, four devices stand out as contributing to abusive power dynamics: ambiguity, bracketing, excusing, and justification. We will define each of these devices, and then go on to look at how these devices are weaponized, knowingly or unknowingly, to gaslight and to reinforce trauma bonds.

Ambiguity occurs in language when a statement’s meaning is unclear and leaves room for different interpretations. Ambiguity burdens the listener in a way that destabilizes their understanding of reality. In these cases, the lack of clarity introduces new complexity that may provide a perspective that contradicts the listener’s existing interpretation of the situation. This ambiguous language keeps the truth hidden by forcing a listener to interpret unclear language. While there is a certain level of ambiguity to all language, in some contexts ambiguity can be used as a tool to mislead audiences, leaving them confused and leaving them ill equipped to confront abusive behaviors in the future. For example, ambiguity might be used by speakers to avoid facing or acknowledging a problem or their involvement in it (Adams, Towns, and Gavey 1995).

Similar to ambiguity, bracketing attempts to misguide audiences and compromise their reasoning and perceptions of reality. This rhetorical device “involves fencing off an activity or event so it does not disturb or disrupt the more general overall frame of a message” (Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan 2008, 113). Bracketing attempts to distract or misdirect audiences from what a speaker wants to hide or ignore. It limits the scope of what is criticizable, consequently weakening the audience’s ability to protest. One common method of bracketing is to equate a perception with moral or intellectual failure. For instance, if someone is being accused of repeatedly lying to manipulate others, that person might respond by saying, “Why do you always assume the worst of me? You’ve never trusted me.” They bracket off their own dishonesty by making it a moral failure to bring it up. Or, they might accomplish the bracketing by saying, “Are you really this gullible? Do you always assume your first perception of a situation is reality?” Here, they bracket off their dishonesty by claiming that someone would be unintelligent to see their behavior as dishonest.

Perhaps the most common rhetorical device used to accomplish bracketing is an axiomatic statement (Adams, Towns, and Gavey 1995, 394). Axiomatic statements are claims about the nature of reality that rely on an external authority, such as common sense. Sayings like, “It’s just the way it is,” or, “That’s just the way the world works,” and “The truth of the matter is . . .” all serve to make audiences believe that the situation at hand is unchangeable and that refusal is not an option. In religious rhetoric, bracketing through axioms usually occurs through an appeal to divine authority. For example, citing a sacred text can be a way of asserting a truth without needing to defend its validity. Axiomatic statements challenge an

audience's agency and autonomy by imposing a worldview that is hard to argue with, even when the underlying meaning is insidious. We include this device within bracketing because, in order to maintain power, it shuts people down before they have a chance to assert themselves and fences off the abusive behavior as unquestionable or unchangeable.

Like bracketing, excusing and justification are rhetorical tactics that aim to skew the audience's views of a situation and cause them to doubt their own judgment. Rather than misdirecting an audience's attention towards a separate subject matter, seen in bracketing, excusing and justification attempt to provide reasons for an abuser's behavior and counter the audience's understanding of the abuse. These two terms are similar, but there is an important distinction to be made between them. Excusing "involves acknowledging the negative features of the situation, but playing down or dismissing responsibility" (Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan 2008, 114). When a speaker uses an excuse, they accept that a situation has had negative consequences and should not have happened. However, they do not take accountability for their actions and dismiss blame. Justification, on the other hand, "involves acknowledging responsibility for the situation, but playing down or dismissing its negative features" (Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan 2008, 114). Unlike excusing, justification does hold the speaker accountable, admitting responsibility. However, the speaker tries to minimize their negative impact or perhaps even attribute positive consequences to what has occurred (Seeger and Griffin Padgett 2010). When used together, excuses and justification work to confuse audiences. A speaker may contradict themselves by taking responsibility for an action in one moment, while then going on to offer excuses. This is all to appear receptive to audiences' concerns without actually having to make changes to their behaviors. Abusers might justify their abuse by telling survivors that what happened "wasn't that bad," minimizing the survivor's experience. They might make an excuse by claiming that they acted a certain way because they believed their actions to be in the survivor's best interest. They attempt to make their behavior seem more acceptable, shifting their audience's perception of the situation and making them question their own judgment.

Results of Abusive Rhetoric: Gaslighting and Trauma-Bonding

We turn now to a brief examination of how these rhetorical devices often function in the context of domestic violence and intimate partner violence. First, we want to highlight the way this violent rhetoric lends itself to gaslighting. Second, we will see how this rhetoric also exploits and perpetuates the trauma bonds that often arise within an abusive relationship. By accomplishing these outcomes through violent rhetoric, an abuser is able to maintain control over their victims.

First, gaslighting is a strategy for controlling someone in such a way that they begin to doubt their perception of reality (Graves and Spencer 2021, 48; Abramson 2014). It is a dysfunctional form of communication that uses rhetorical strategies to manipulate victims' perceptions of themselves, their relationships, their environments, and the abuse itself. The goal is to instill a deep-seeded self-doubt that undermines their ability to trust their own thoughts. This can be done in various ways through the rhetorical devices previously named. For example, by using ambiguous language, gaslighters can confuse victims, destabilizing their sense of reality. Ambiguity not only distorts a victim's perception of reality, but it leaves them vulnerable to future attempts to replace the victim's worldview with that of the abuser: "An

abuser creates a host of misconceptions to get his partner to doubt herself and to make it possible for him to lead her down dead-end paths” (Bancroft 2003, 50).

Bracketing is also used to accomplish gaslighting in the abuser’s attempts to redirect victims’ attention to other subject matter and dismiss criticism of their harmful behavior. The abuser brackets off their actions, briefly acknowledging them, but then refutes their abusiveness. Axiomatic statements such as, “A man is king of his castle,” or, “The Bible says, ‘Wives be obedient to your husband,’” simply assert that the abusive behavior is beyond questioning. Ultimately, according to Bancroft, “the abusive man wants to be a mystery. To get away with his behavior and to avoid having to face his problem, he needs to convince everyone around him—and himself—that his behavior makes no sense. He needs his partner to focus on everything except the real causes of his behavior” (2003, 18). It is important to note that bracketing is not only used to cloud an audience’s perceptions but is also used to convince the speaker of their own intentions. At times, rhetoric is also used to cope with a frightening reality, even from an abuser’s perspective. An abuser might speak to conceal the adverse effects of their behavior, perhaps masking their actions with statements about how much they love the victim in order to convince themselves that their behavior is good and selfless rather than controlling and harmful.

Lastly, excuses and justification accomplish gaslighting by minimizing and/or dismissing the victims’ experiences. This also contributes to an audience’s self-doubt as speakers can use excuses to deny blame or to deny that abuse has occurred at all. For instance, an abuser might offer the excuse that he needs to be tough because he is afforded so little respect. Similarly, he might offer a justification such as, “I do this because I love you.” Statements such as these put victims’ perceptions into question. While it is easy to assume that this violent rhetoric is always utilized with the intent to manipulate, it needs to be said that gaslighting is a phenomenon that can occur consciously *and* unconsciously. While an abuser may not intentionally use language to manipulate or distort a person’s sense of reality, these rhetorical devices still cause gaslighting. Regardless of a speaker’s intentions, gaslighting can still “completely erode someone’s sense-making resources—destroying a significant component of identity and producing a host of negative psychological outcomes. Moreover . . . gaslighting harms people specifically in their capacities as knowers” (Graves and Spencer 2021, 50).

The second result of violent rhetoric we wish to address is the reinforcement of trauma bonds. While trauma bonds might socially and culturally be understood as a positive identification with those who share common traumatic experiences, psychologists typically understand trauma bonds to be, “developed as the result of ongoing cycles of abuse in which the intermittent reinforcement of reward and punishment creates powerful emotional bonds that are resistant to change” (Effiong, Ibeagha, and Iorfa 2022, 3621). This can look like “emotional attachments . . . typically marked by paradoxical complexities of abuse, control and dependency, and deep feelings of love, admiration, and gratitude in the victim for the abuser” (Casassa, Knight, and Mengo 2021, 970). The rhetoric that abusers use can shape how victims perceive their experience of abuse and of their abuser (Dutton and Painter 1993; Lahav 2021). Given the powerful nature of these bonds, an abuser is able to use rhetoric in a manner that appeals to these emotions in an effort to maintain control over their victim. (Abramson 2014, 20) The phrase, “No one will ever love you the way I love you,” is an example of rhetoric that appeals to trauma bonds in order to maintain control over one’s victim.

Rhetorically, this can be seen when an abuser employs ambiguity by speaking kindly and charitably in one moment, but then communicating in a way that is totally contradictory (controlling, violent, and manipulative) in another. This is done so that victims are led to perceive their abusers as loving and develop an attachment to them whilst fearing them at the same time. Similarly, bracketing cultivates trauma bonds when abusers reference their love and passion for the victim while completely dismissing their abusiveness. They might attempt to remind the victim of the relationship that they share and the victim's dependence on them for affection in order to redirect the conversation from their own abusive behavior. Lastly, justification and excuses can work similarly to bracketing in this way as an abuser might appeal to a trauma bond so that a victim will stay in the relationship and validate the abuse that has occurred. An abuser could make justifications and call upon the emotional attachment between them as a reason to stay despite the abuse that has occurred, reinforcing the abuser's power and holding the victim captive. They will often try to excuse their actions and attempt to convince the victim that they act out of love, trapping the victim in a predicament. If the victim leaves the perpetrator, then they might be perceived or depicted as ungrateful for the love their abuser offers. This exploitation of trauma bonds will become especially relevant in our discussion of the way that Catholic leaders respond to systemic CPSA.

Violent Rhetoric in Response to Systemic CPSA

Having highlighted the harmful role played by rhetoric in the context of domestic violence and intimate partner violence, we will now turn to examine the ways that the rhetoric employed by Roman Catholic leaders in response to systemic CPSA often mimics that of domestic abusers. Specifically, we wish to highlight the ways that Catholic leaders speak that prioritizes maintaining the status quo (i.e., the hierarchical, clericalist structure of the Catholic Church) over the healing of those who have been affected by systemic CPSA. In this section, we will show that, in a similar fashion to domestic abusers, Catholic leaders rely on ambiguity, bracketing, excuse, and justification in a way that seeks to keep the laity under the controlling influence of the clergy. As with abusers in domestic violence and intimate partner violence, these rhetorical devices accomplish the gaslighting and reinforcement of trauma bonds necessary to keep the laity from leaving the context of abuse. Before analyzing forms of violent rhetoric, it is important to note the role that intentionality plays in our language. We are not always conscious of the ways that our words impact listeners and there are times when rhetorical outcomes are not what we intend to communicate. In this section, our goal is not to assign hostile intentions to these statements, but rather show the ways that language has the ability to perpetuate violence regardless of a speaker's intention.

Ambiguity

As we pointed out in our previous section, ambiguity is a rhetorical device that readily lends itself to exploiting the trauma bonds that form in relationships marked by abusive power-imbalance because of the way it can make the listener feel unstable and uncertain.⁴ As Bancroft

⁴ To be clear, ambiguity is not harmful in and of itself. All language is marked by ambiguity. Metaphors are pervasive in all linguistic contexts. Our point is that a speaker should strive to minimize the way that ambiguity provokes uncertainty and instability in their listeners, especially when the speaker is addressing the survivors of abuse.

points out, creating confusion is a hallmark of abusive behavior: “The abuser creates confusion because he has to. He can’t control and intimidate you, he can’t recruit people around him to take his side, he can’t keep escaping the consequences of his actions, unless he can throw everyone off the track” (Bancroft 2003, 20). When publicly addressing systemic CPSA, Catholic leaders often use various forms of ambiguous language as they describe the crisis (Blaney and Zompetti 2009, 206). This ambiguity can make listeners doubt their own perception of the abuse and its cause. Further, ambiguity is also used when these leaders describe the reasons that people should continue to participate in the faith community. By creating a sense of uncertainty, a bishop can reinforce their own authority by accentuating the lay person’s perceived dependence on clerical guidance. As with domestic violence and intimate partner violence, this feeling of dependence triggers trauma bonds, thereby becoming a powerful motivation for refusing to leave the abusive relationship (Lahav 2023, 1819). When a traumatized person is gaslighted and made to doubt their perception of the world, it becomes easier for an abusive authority figure to exert control by instilling their own worldview (Casassa, Knight, and Mengo 2021, 971).

Ambiguity can be accomplished in many ways. For example, in an effort to maintain a relationship to those expressing anger with Catholic leaders, Timothy Cardinal Dolan, the archbishop of New York, speaks in a manner that introduces ambiguity to the conversation: “When people say to me you know, we’re angry, we’re confused, bewildered, frustrated, I think they might expect me to be on the defensive, and I’ll say, ‘Nice to meet you. So am I.’ We’re all in this together. . . . There’s almost a solidarity in the sorrow” (Lapin 2018). As one of the most prominent Catholic leaders in the United States, the Cardinal is being met with anger for his role in systemic CPSA. However, rather than accepting that he is the object of their anger, he immediately responds with a comment that seeks to redefine his role in the scandal. This is a clear example of gaslighting through ambiguity. Rather than allowing the traumatized faithful to express their anger toward him and the Catholic leadership, instead of focusing on the pain that is courageously being shared, his response quickly reframes himself as a victim who is also angry and in pain. It is important to notice that Dolan does not offer an excuse or shirk responsibility (a rhetorical device we will return to shortly). Rather, he quickly reframes his role in a manner that introduces ambiguity to the way people will perceive him, aiming to align himself solely with the traumatized, rather than a leader to be held responsible. This ambiguity allows Dolan to assert a closeness to the harmed laity. His listeners are left questioning how they should feel about this powerful leader: Is he to blame? Is he actually powerful enough to change anything? Is he just like me? Again, the similarities to the language of domestic violence and intimate partner violence abusers are readily apparent. Bancroft points out that abusers go to great lengths to draw attention to their own feelings and their own suffering: “He draws you into focusing on the turbulent world of his feelings to keep your eyes turned away from the true cause of his abusiveness, which lies in how he *thinks*” (2003, 21).

Another form of ambiguous language that is pervasive in responses to systemic CPSA is metaphor.⁵ One incredibly powerful example of ambiguity being accomplished through metaphor comes from Bishop Robert Barron's *Letter to a Suffering Church* where he repeatedly uses the images "treasure" and "vessel." Barron adopts these metaphors directly from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7). Barron immediately defines these metaphors: "The treasure is the grace of Christ, the new life made available through the dying and rising of Jesus, and the vessels are the deeply flawed, fragile, and morally suspect people who have received that grace and who are endeavoring to live that new life" (2019, 42). Barron uses these metaphors to create a clean separation between the problem to be fixed (i.e., the vessels) and the value to be retained (i.e., the treasure). If he can convince his reader that the treasure should be our primary concern, then, regardless of whatever complaints we might have about the vessel, we need to retain our proximity to the treasure.

Once in place as a framework, the treasure/vessel metaphor can be used to emphasize dependence on the clerical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Barron is free to use the image of "treasure" to isolate the aspects of the Catholic Church he does not want questioned. For example, Barron says, "Let me state it bluntly: the Eucharist is the single most important reason for staying faithful to the Church. You can't find it anywhere else; and no wickedness on the part of priests or bishops can affect it" (2019, 74). The Eucharist, a cleric-led ritual at the heart of Roman Catholic culture, is identified as "the treasure" that should never be abandoned. While many people who have been deeply traumatized by the sexual abuse crisis now experience the Eucharist as a place of harm and violence (Orsi 2017, 289; Turnbloom et al. 2022, 6–9), Barron's use of metaphor functions to introduce ambiguity into their experience. Essentially, he is gaslighting them by trying to help them see beauty where they feel pain. The metaphor then functions to introduce ambiguity where so many people who have experienced the effects of the sexual assault crisis are clear: being near the Eucharist and the clerical culture that founds it is not a matter of being near treasure. Quite the contrary, being near the "treasure" described by Barron is being near the dehumanization of abuse. When he says, ". . . we don't stay because of the vessels. We stay because of the treasure," he is prescribing a false patience that would have those effected by the sexual abuse crisis maintain their proximity to a culture that Barron himself acknowledges is deeply abusive (Barron 2019, 59). Much like someone who commits domestic violence might insist that underneath their abusive behaviors lies a deep and unique love that cannot be found anywhere else ("No one will ever love you like I do"), Barron insists that in and through these abusive church structures there lies a divine love that is not available anywhere else. Hence, after having listened to hundreds of people who have been sexually abused, he is still able to say and genuinely believe that, "There is simply never a good reason to leave the Church. Never" (2019, 59).

The similarity to the way that domestic abusers utilize ambiguity should be readily apparent. This use of metaphor is employed to reframe a survivor's experience in a manner that provokes uncertainty and fear and assures continued dependence. This theological

⁵ Theological language is primarily composed of metaphor. As long as metaphorical language is understood as such, this is not necessarily a harmful way of communicating. In fact, it is a form of speaking that is rooted in epistemic humility, employed to avoid the self-idolatry of certainty.

rhetoric leads to the self-doubt that inhibits the impulse to distance oneself from the source of violence. Ambiguity, then, exploits and reinforces trauma bonds by deteriorating the agency of those affected by systemic CPSA. Or, to use Cassasa's words: "In place of self, the victim then becomes dependent on the perpetrator, internalizing the perpetrator's worldviews; the perpetrator is idealized, and the victim 'takes on' the blame and guilt of any toxicity or exploitation in the relationship while seeking to please the perpetrator" (Cassasa, Knight, and Mengo 2021, 971). Creating confusion is what makes ambiguity so successful and powerful because it hides the other rhetorical tactics being used while also dismantling the survivor's sense of reality, making them more vulnerable and less likely to confront the abuser again. Ambiguity, then, functions like a rhetorical smokescreen. Once its destabilizing damage is done, other abusive rhetorical devices are more easily and more effectively utilized. This brings us to our next rhetorical device: bracketing.

Bracketing

As ambiguity can function to destabilize a listener's perception of reality, bracketing consists of diverting the attention of the listener in the wrong direction. As we noted previously, bracketing is accomplished by fencing off an issue so that it goes unrecognized, unquestioned, and unchanged. By controlling the focus of their audience's gaze, Catholic leaders are able to muddle the perception of the abusive situation. An example of bracketing can be seen in an analysis of the way that Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have employed the categories of "sin" and "crime" to describe systemic CPSA. In an article entitled, "The Catholic Church Sex Abuse Crisis: The Rhetoric of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis," Sophia Rita Jadda (2022) argues that John Paul II and Benedict XVI tended to describe systemic CPSA primarily using the category of "sin." Further, when describing this sin, they were careful to point to the corrupting influence of secularism and modernity. By choosing the category of sin, these Catholic leaders were able to bracket their own moral authority and the authority of their church's culture. "Sin" is a spiritual category which lies decidedly within the purview of the church, especially its clergy. Jadda notes, "The major interest of the church was to hold back the abuses from the secular society in order to protect both the institution and its hierarchy and to maintain the position of power and authority" (2022, 129).

In contrast, Pope Francis would later begin to use the category of "crime" when describing systemic CPSA. Unlike sin, crime is not the purview of the church. By adopting this category, Francis is acknowledging an external authority to which the church is beholden. In other words, his choice of words is no longer bracketing the moral authority of the church in order to protect it from criticism. In Jadda's words, ". . . the term 'crime' leads to the recognition of a very specific configuration in which there is a victim and an offender who is accountable to civil justice—besides being accountable to God—and that involves punishment too" (2022, 139).

Avoiding calling systemic CPSA a crime and instead calling it a sin is a form of bracketing that seeks to maintain clerical authority and control over the situation. Although it is undeniable that sexual abuse is both a sin and a crime, sin is not the only category that should be used in addressing systemic CPSA. By solely using the category of sin to address the nature of abuse, John Paul II and Benedict XVI were providing a framework intended to shape the

experience of those affected by the abuse. Rather than seeing abusers as criminals who had been sheltered by bishops and knowingly inflicted upon the laity, they were being framed as imperfect pastors who needed help to return to holiness. For example, in an address to the cardinals of the United States, John Paul II (2002) wrote: “At the same time . . . we cannot forget the power of Christian conversion, that radical decision to turn away from sin and back to God, which reaches to depths of a person’s soul and can work extraordinary change.”

Lastly, perhaps the most common form of bracketing within religious contexts is the use of axiomatic statements that rely on the authority of tradition and/or divine revelation. Instead of drawing the audience’s attention away from the clericalist culture that abuses its power, the speaker can simply equate that culture with God’s will. Bishop Barron’s use of the scriptural metaphor “treasure” is a clear example of bracketing through axiomatic statements. As we saw above, he makes it clear that, as part of the “treasure” entrusted to the church, there is never a good reason to distance oneself from the Eucharist or to question the current structure of the priesthood. In fact, he says these things are only entertained by the extremely naive: “I don’t think for a moment that a change in [the priesthood’s] essential structure is called for. In my judgment, it is naive in the extreme to imagine that allowing priests to marry or women to be priests will greatly ameliorate this situation” (2019, 89). Since these clericalist structures are unquestionable, Barron is left simply prescribing a “renewal” of the current abusive culture via a “rededication to [the priesthood’s] ideals” (2019, 90). All of this language functions as rhetorical bracketing intended to maintain the authority of Catholic leadership.

Excuse and Justification

Lastly, we turn to the rhetorical backbone of gaslighting: excuse and justification. Excuse, on one hand, tries to dismiss blame and may sound like, “It’s not really my fault.” In contrast, justification acknowledges wrongdoing, but minimizes its severity: “It’s my fault, but it’s not that bad” (Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan 2008, 114). Together, excuse and justification have been utilized by Catholic leaders in a manner that allows them to simultaneously appear to accept responsibility while mitigating blame and eschewing calls for clerical reform. In the following analysis of rhetoric from Catholic leaders it is clear that excuses and justifications are used in a manner that asks Catholics to “stay.”

Barron’s first chapter of *Letter to a Suffering Church* serves as a strong example of how excuses result in gaslighting. Titled “The Devil’s Masterpiece,” Barron argues, “If the Church had a personal enemy—and indeed the devil is known as the enemy of the human race—it is hard to imagine that he could have come up with a better plan” (2019, 4). In this, Barron shifts the blame from the Catholic clergy’s failure to a failure that ultimately is the fault of the devil. When discussing the causes of abuse within the Catholic Church, it is common to see people implicate church culture, the problematic nature of hierarchy, and the need for serious clerical reform (Hanlon Rubio and Schutz 2022; Orsi 2017). However, Barron downplays these causes, choosing instead to focus the reader’s attention on Satan. Barron does not fail to acknowledge that people were hurt by the abuse. Excusing involves recognition of pain, and Barron does clearly acknowledge that harm has been done. However, when there is a call for accountability and pushes for substantial reform of the priesthood, blaming the devil is an excuse meant to redirect the reader’s attention and challenge their perception of who is to blame.

Despite Barron's intentions, rhetorical excuses can perpetuate a culture of abuse that inhibits healing and retraumatizes those affected by the abuse. Describing the role of excuse in domestic violence and intimate partner violence, Bancroft writes, ". . . a batterer may strive to manipulate his partner's perceptions of his actions or to create confusion about the causes or meaning of the incidents" (2003, 17). By beginning his book with a discussion of the devil's central role in systemic CPSA, Barron shifts the reader's focus from the Catholic clergy in a way that qualifies and mitigates any responsibility he tries to accept in subsequent pages. If this is all the devil's plan, then is the church really responsible? Barron asks the reader, "Has this explosion of wickedness been the devil's masterpiece?" and answers on their behalf, "Yes," (2019, 16).

The rhetoric of excuse extends to the highest levels of Catholic leadership, including the Papacy. Returning to Jadda's article, she highlights the rhetoric of John Paul II, arguing that he sought to characterize systemic CPSA as a result of "the crisis of morality that arose with the advent of modernity" (2022, 131). Similar to the utilization of excuse present in Barron, John Paul II acknowledged the trauma inflicted upon the laity. However, while Barron excused such horror as the result of the devil's meddling, John Paul II placed the blame on what he viewed as a crisis of "sexual morality." Jadda cites John Paul II's address to the Cardinals of the United States:

The abuse of the young is a grave symptom of a crisis affecting not only the Church but society as whole. It is a deep-seated crisis of sexual morality, even of human relationships, and its prime victims are the family and the young (Jadda 2022, 134).

The language employed by John Paul II shifts the blame from the church and projects blame onto an entire societal issue, something that the church cannot be solely responsible for. In the cases of domestic violence and intimate partner violence, instead of taking full responsibility, an abusive partner may recognize the wrongful nature of their actions but place the blame on something they portray as out of their control such as a hard day at work, financial stress, or even place the blame of such violence upon the behavior of their victim. Inside the church this utilization of excuse creates an environment in which those who find fault with the Catholic hierarchy have their perceptions dismissed (through gaslighting) and find themselves unable to confront the hierarchical, clericalist structure of the church.

Statements and writings from church leaders occasionally make contradictory arguments for who is at fault for systemic CPSA. When paired with prior excuses, justification allows the leaders to appear to take responsibility. For example, well after he places the ultimate blame on Satan and rampant sexual immorality, Barron juxtaposes this claim and acknowledges that the members of the Catholic Church do share in the blame (2019, 53). However, he utilizes the rhetorical device of justification to mitigate the magnitude of the fault. Barron attempts to normalize the abuse through a historical retelling of previous church scandals, ultimately claiming that there is a silver lining to this abuse.

Central to Barron's call to "stay," lays the argument that such a crisis is not unprecedented. Throughout the chapter titled, "We've Been Here Before," Barron utilizes justification to pacify the laity through a fallacious historical contextualization, known as historical presentism (Fischer 1970, 141). In utilizing the story of St. Damien, Barron uses a scandal from hundreds

of years ago to argue that the current situation is of the same nature. This revisionist history is a form of justification because it is tantamount to saying, “This abuse might seem terrible, but it is actually quite common. If you were more aware of history, perhaps this wouldn’t be so shocking to you.” Then, Barron goes so far as to describe awareness of this history as an immunization that can protect us from getting too upset with the current abuse, attempting to point out a “silver lining.” However, what may seem to be an attempt at a positive outlook, actually functions as a means to invalidate the experience of those affected by systemic CPSA. After detailing horrifying stories of past abuses of power in the Catholic Church, he says, “Hearing these dark tales was a bit like receiving an immunization. Having taken in the very worst of Church history, we could even more clearly understand that there is nevertheless something good, even indestructibly good, about the Mystical Body of Christ” (2019, 44). Justification of this nature accomplishes gaslighting by making people doubt their own experience of suffering. Like an abuser that says, “You have no idea how good you have it,” these justifications instill doubt and diminish any impulse to leave the abusive context.

Barron is by no means the only Catholic leader who has justified systemic CPSA by appealing to “silver linings.” In Pope John Paul II’s April 2002 address to the United States Cardinals he tried to find this silver lining. John Paul II addressed the American Catholic Bishops amidst the flurry of scandals in 2002 saying, “We must be confident that this time of trial will bring a purification of the entire Catholic community, a purification that is urgently needed if the Church is to preach more effectively the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its liberating force.” The silver lining approach serves as a means of justification as the abuser seeks to find the opportunity for good in their own actions, invalidating the level of harm they have done to their victim. In the context of domestic violence/intimate partner violence this may sound like, “Every relationship has hard times, but this makes us stronger and closer in the end.” The argument describing systemic CPSA as a time for church purification places the narrative soundly in the church’s control, and seeks to draw attention away from the harm perpetuated by the Catholic Church’s abusive culture, arguing that the abuse ultimately provides an opportunity for something positive.

All these rhetorical devices are consistently found throughout Catholic leaders’ responses to systemic CPSA. This abusive rhetoric affects the gaslighting and the exploitation of trauma bonds that hinder a person’s ability to leave their abusive context. Further, this abusive rhetoric continues the disintegration of the laity’s already all-too-truncated agency within the Roman Catholic Church. If Catholic leaders want to accomplish the *cultural* shift necessary to root out abuse and begin healing, there are many deep-seeded changes that must occur (Arbuckle 2019). Here, we wish to offer one linguistic change that could help avoid the harm we have outlined. Namely, by adopting principles of a Trauma-Informed Rhetoric, Roman Catholics may begin to speak about systemic CPSA in ways that better recognize and address the root causes of sexual violence.

Toward a Trauma-Informed Rhetoric

In our previous comparison of rhetoric used by domestic abusers and Catholic leaders, we clearly see how such language gaslights and reinforces trauma bonds, thus perpetuating trauma. Examining the rhetoric in response to systemic CPSA is essential as it plays a large role in the formation of wider church culture and the handling of the sex abuse crisis.

Specifically, due to the privilege they hold, the rhetoric of those in power (e.g., Catholic leaders, domestic abusers, etc.) often amplifies previous consequences of trauma (e.g., moral injury, moral distress, and PTSD) (Turnbloom et al. 2022). In the context of systemic CPSA and the Roman Catholic Church, clergy have the power to influence the entire community's perception of the sex abuse crisis, the legitimacy of survivors' trauma, and the expectations of how to respond to this abuse. All these factors have the potential to retraumatize and prolong suffering rather than build safety and promote healing. For this reason, we emphasize that the principles of trauma-informed rhetoric that we will now provide do not only apply to Catholic leaders, but to the entire Roman Catholic community. In order to address and mitigate these lasting consequences of trauma, Catholic clergy and all Roman Catholics must adopt an empathetic, trauma-informed way of speaking that we call a Trauma-Informed Rhetoric (hereafter, TIR).

Four Principles of Trauma Informed Rhetoric (TIR)

Trauma-informed care has varying definitions and articulations depending on the context it is being employed. Here, we will be using an adaptation of frameworks and definitions collected from various professional organizations (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014; Kimberg and Wheeler, 2019; National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2017; Ades 2019; Menschner and Maul 2016). The four principles of TIR⁶ we will be using are: (1) safety, (2) empowerment through agency, (3) communication and transparency, and (4) intersectionality. We will define each principle, provide an example of its rhetorical application, and provide an example of positive TIR in relation to systemic CPSA.

The first principle, *safety*, cannot stand on its own and finds its fullest expression through the application of the next three principles. To start, safety itself must include both the physical and psychological aspects that together cultivate a sense of safety for those who have been traumatized (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014, 11). When an environment is safe for both the mind and body, a person is able to fully participate and be present to the environment without fear of re-traumatization or being taken advantage of. By intentionally working to create a safe environment, one is able to cultivate a place that decreases the occurrence of unnecessary triggers (National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2017).

For the principle of safety to be at the core of TIR, the speaker must understand the impact of triggers and seek to minimize the occurrence of unnecessary and unintended triggers. Hence, a TIR will strive for clarity, reducing the use of ambiguity, and thereby cultivating a psychologically safe space. If Catholic leaders were to address systemic CPSA using TIR, they would speak in a manner that assures the physical, psychological, and spiritual safety of their listeners. Phrases such as, "God's love is unconditional. There is nothing you need to do to earn it, and there is nothing you could do to lose it," could be used to avoid theologies that function as thinly veiled threats to one's spiritual wellbeing.

⁶ We are using the term Trauma-Informed Rhetoric to show how the trauma-informed approach can be applied to the use of Rhetoric. To our knowledge, there has not been any other use of this term "Trauma-Informed Rhetoric" in academia. We want to emphasize that our use of this term and its principles have been adjusted from the trauma-informed approach to apply to this type of abusive language.

As stated above, the principle of safety cannot come to fruition without the combination of these next three principles. The second principle for TIR is *empowerment through agency*. This principle seeks to return a sense of agency and choice back to the person affected by trauma. This empowerment occurs by helping them find strength in their experiences. In abusive situations, survivors are often silenced and barred from making independent choices (e.g., what they may wear or eat, or where they live or who they can see). Empowering a survivor through agency means fostering their ability to choose and be heard, directly combating the silencing a survivor has experienced. This can be accomplished in part through rhetoric that offers authentic choices to a survivor. For example, rhetoric focused on this empowerment of choice and agency gives a person the ability to leave a space that perpetuates trauma and find resources elsewhere without fear of moral obligations or consequences, like leaving one church in favor of finding safety in another (or none at all).

Catholic leaders can build up the agency of those affected by systemic CPSA by speaking in ways that express trust in their audience, while also affirming their decisions, even if their decision is disaffiliation from the church. Recall Robert Barron's use of the vessel/treasure metaphors: "We don't stay because of the vessels. We stay because of the treasure." Here, Barron is employing bracketing in order to dismiss his audience's reasons for wanting to leave the church. By applying the principle of empowerment through agency, such manipulative bracketing would be avoided precisely because it attempts to reduce the autonomy of the traumatized person. Alternatively, an example of rhetoric that utilized the principle of empowerment through agency comes from Pope Benedict XVI. In a letter addressing systemic CPSA, the former pope gave an example of a woman who was an altar server and a survivor of clerical sexual abuse. At the beginning of every assault, her assailant would say the words of consecration (i.e., "This is my body"), thus permanently changing the meaning of those ritual words for the survivor. Pope Benedict XVI understands this shift when he says, ". . . this woman can no longer hear the very words of consecration without experiencing again all of the horrific distress of her abuse" (2019). Simply by understanding that the meanings of symbols and words drastically change based on a person's experiences, Pope Benedict XVI is giving the agency back to the survivor and creating an environment that allows her to regain the ability to choose what is necessary for her without guilt and fear.

The third principle we will discuss is *communication and transparency*. This principle aims to create a line of honest communication between the community and leadership. When rhetoric is formed by this principle, there will be clear and consistent communication between the community and leadership, especially when decisions are being made (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014, 11). This is important because it lays the foundation for trust. Within rhetoric itself, this looks like integrating knowledge of trauma within conversations allowing for productive, inclusive conversations. Through communication and transparency, trust has the ability to be rebuilt within all relationships and the larger culture. This third principle aims at creating a better understanding of one another, the needs of the community, and honesty without a power facade. When all this functions together in rebuilding trust, safety can exist. For Catholic leaders, this means avoiding the desire to quickly defend institutional reputation and perceived dogmatic clarity. Rather, creating space for dissent and criticism is paramount. If we take the previously mentioned example from Timothy Dolan, "We're all in this together . . . there is almost a solidarity in the

sorrow,” we can charitably assume that the goal of this statement is to express the sentiment that a survivor is not alone in their pain. In order to express this sentiment using the principle of communication and transparency, the Archbishop of Chicago, Blase Cardinal Cupich (2018), writes, “The culture of self-protection, privilege and power that shielded abusers must be eradicated. It reflects a corrupt sense of entitlement without regard for honesty, accountability or, most important, the safety of young people and adults entrusted to our care.” By using TIR, Cupich is working towards solidarity by starting with honest accountability. He does not assume a right to solidarity.

The fourth and final principle is *intersectionality*, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2023). Within the context of TIR, intersectionality is used as a hermeneutic to understand the whole person, through all their identities and how those identities are intertwined. These intersecting identities refer to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, history, culture, geography, and so on. Understanding the ways in which each of these identities overlap allows for a deeper understanding of the impact trauma has on a person. For example, the way some immigrant communities are left more vulnerable to those in power (e.g., Catholic pastors) due to language barriers and difficulty navigating foreign, oppressive systems, allows them to be taken advantage of at higher rates than the general population (Schrack and Barragan 2018; Medina 2017). Because experiences and identities that leave someone vulnerable (language barriers, race, history, environment, etc.) often intersect, this leaves those most vulnerable to trauma in positions to be re- or further traumatized. Intersectionality as a hermeneutic for rhetoric allows us to see the multitude of factors that make one vulnerable to trauma and their compounding effects. Consider this quote from Bishop Robert Barron: “The Prophets didn’t cut and run . . . prophets spoke out. That’s all of our responsibility, all of us who bear the prophetic charism” (Barron, Jones, and Long 2018). This quote fails to utilize intersectionality because it homogenizes all Catholics as “prophets” who all share the exact same responsibilities. Further, he shames those who have already disaffiliated by implying that they failed in their responsibility as prophets and instead “cut and run” out of cowardice. When a leader sees her community as a homogenous group, those most in need of support are judged on inequitable standards and denied help.

In contrast to Barron, the rhetoric of Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger (2023) prioritizes the uniqueness of each survivor. In a statement to his congregation he writes, “The work of vigilance, justice and purification goes on. So does the accompaniment of all survivors . . . It affects the way we must preach and catechize, conscious always of the presence of those among us who may suffer in silence, without awareness of or unable to access the remedies that are indeed available.” Through this rhetoric, Bishop Scharfenberger shows awareness of the diverse identities of all survivors and the specific challenges that they may face in processing trauma and seeking help. He is also conscious of the impact that preaching has on those suffering and how trauma can be perpetuated if we do not acknowledge that the experience of systemic CPSA and healing from it cannot be generalized. Bishop Scharfenberger’s reference to the “accompaniment of all survivors” here is key to note as clergy must support and assist survivors in order to know how to preach. He is aware that there must be a diversity of ways to catechize because there is a diverse group of people in need of accompaniment in this crisis. This is an example of how rhetoric can embrace intersectionality, understanding that all people need to be supported in ways that affirm their identities and the

ways that they are impacted by systemic injustice and sex abuse in this context. In relation to safety, using an intersectional approach allows a person to be seen for who they are entirely. This cultivates a better understanding of the person in front of you instead of simply adopting the larger stereotypical response. Being seen for who they are, especially amidst all their traumatic experiences, allows a person to let go and be more present, knowing they are safe and not at risk for re-traumatization or re-victimization. They will be seen without judgment and have the opportunity to receive support that accompanies their circumstances and unique experiences.

Rhetorical Devices	Example of Violent Rhetoric	Application of TIR
Ambiguity	“When people say to me you know, we’re angry, we’re confused, bewildered, frustrated, I think they might expect me to be on the defensive, and I’ll say, ‘Nice to meet you. So am I.’ We’re all in this together. . . . There’s almost solidarity in the sorrow.” (Timothy Dolan)	“The culture of self-protection, privilege and power that shielded abusers must be eradicated. It reflects a corrupt sense of entitlement without regard for honesty, accountability or, most important, the safety of young people and adults entrusted to our care.” (Blase Cupich)
Bracketing	“We don’t stay because of the vessels. We stay because of the treasure.” (Robert Barron)	“. . . this woman can no longer hear the very words of consecration without experiencing again all of the horrific distress of her.” (Pope Benedict XVI)
Excusing and Justification	“Prophets didn’t cut and run. . . prophets spoke out. That’s all of our responsibility, all of us who bear the prophetic charism.” (Robert Barron)	“So does the accompaniment of all survivors . . . It affects the way we must preach and catechize, conscious always of the presence of those among us who may suffer in silence, without awareness of or unable to access the remedies that are indeed available.” (Edward Scharfenberger)

Conclusion

Our goal in this essay has been to elucidate the harmful role that rhetoric can play in cultivating a culture of abuse, while also indicating some ways that rhetoric might be employed to transform an abusive culture into one that better appreciates the persistent roots of abuse and the far-reaching consequences of trauma. To conclude, we wish to reiterate that the effects wrought by rhetoric are not always intentional. What a leader says and how a leader says it will

impact the community in ways, both profound and subtle, that cannot always be controlled. Further, the influence of rhetoric is not limited to the speaker's audience. Rhetoric also has an influence on the speaker. When someone is confronted with the evidence of their own wrongdoing, or the wrongdoing of their community, that evidence can be experienced as a trauma that threatens their worldview and their identity (Hodgson and Carey 2017). It should be expected, then, that a Roman Catholic leader would employ rhetoric that is meant to pacify himself as much as it is meant to pacify the laity. As we stated earlier, rhetoric is used to cope with a frightening reality, even from an abuser's perspective.

This essay has briefly highlighted the rhetoric of a few Catholic leaders. However, as we have pointed out, it would be a mistake to see systemic CPSA as a problem caused and perpetuated by a group of "bad apples" (Hanlon Rubio and Schutz 2022). Rather, the rhetorical patterns and images that we have enumerated in this essay are manifestations of a problem with the ecclesial culture of Roman Catholicism. A culture rooted in hierarchicalism and clericalism will unsurprisingly cultivate the abuse and oppression of those who are most vulnerable. One main goal of this essay, then, has been to help illuminate the rhetorical devices that one can expect to encounter when a violent culture tries to protect itself from being recognized and changed. Speaking through its most faithful and most loyal adherents, that culture will employ ambiguous metaphors in order to confuse. It will bracket in order to distract its critics from the ongoing failures it cannot defend but cannot live without. It will make excuses and scapegoat the strawmen it wishes were at fault. It will justify itself, insisting that the harm is not as bad as the critics are claiming, especially when compared to how wonderful things could be if people could just trust its divine wisdom. In short, we can expect to hear rhetoric that refuses to acquiesce its power. The rhetoric of abusers, domestic and clerical, is the rhetoric of a culture that is essentially oppressive and violent. As Audre Lorde reminds us, a master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde 1984). So, we hope that this essay can help those affected by systemic CPSA, which is everyone connected to the Catholic Church, to more readily recognize the master's violent rhetorical tools. We also hope that the TIR principles we describe might aid in the dismantling of the violence that continues to crucify those affected by systemic CPSA.

TIR is meant to be a manifestation of a culture that recognizes the pervasive and damaging nature of trauma. It is rhetoric that should be a part of our everyday language, changing the larger culture as well as those perceived as leaders. It is meant to be a way of speaking that seeks to transform how the sex abuse crisis is perceived and how it is treated. Trauma informed rhetoric is not a tool that one should use after they become aware that someone has experienced trauma. Rather, trauma informed rhetoric is intended to replace the status quo and become a pervasive culture. This way of speaking is not a response to trauma; it is one piece of a culture that seeks to prevent trauma and respond adequately. It is how someone speaks if they wish to know the true extent, the true causes, and the true remedies for the trauma of systemic CPSA.

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