The Catholic laity, clerical sexual abuse, and married priesthood: A sociological analysis of Vatican II’s lay empowerment

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Abstract: This article argues that the renewed teaching on lay empowerment of the Roman Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) only involved an enlargement of lay apostolic task in the Church, but not participation in ecclesial governance, which can enable lay Catholics to formally sanction clerical sexual abuse. Applying sociological theoretical insights on power, empowerment, and social bonding, and citing some church documents and secondary literature on empowerment and clerical sexual abuse, it contends that a real and meaningful lay empowerment needs a notable transfer of ecclesial power from the Catholic hierarchy to lay leaders, requiring an amendment on the celibacy rule and the adoption of a married priesthood to allow lay leaders to participate in official church governance to address clerical sexual misconduct. Married priesthood allows diocesan priests to experience a more intimate social bonding and stronger direct and indirect social controls, lacking in the current diocesan clerical life, which can inhibit clerical sexual deviance. Ultimately, this article views lay participation in official church administration and the adoption of a married priesthood as key factors missing in the Vatican II’s decree on lay empowerment, which can greatly strengthen the checks and balances system of the Church against clerical sexual abuse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article argues that the renewed teaching on lay empowerment of the Roman Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) only involved an enlargement of lay apostolic task in the Church, but not participation in ecclesial governance, which can enable lay Catholics to formally sanction clerical sexual abuse. It also contends that a real and meaningful lay empowerment needs power sharing from the Catholic hierarchy to lay leaders, requiring an amendment on the celibacy rule and the adoption of a married priesthood to allow lay leaders to participate in official church governance to regulate clerical sexual abuse. Married priesthood can provide diocesan clergy with intimate social bonding and direct and indirect social control of behavior which can inhibit clerical sexual deviance in the Church.
1. Introduction
The decree on lay empowerment by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), a universal gathering of all Catholic bishops with the Pope in 1962 to update church doctrine and practice in the light of the changing world (Stark & Finke, 2000), is one of the remarkable achievements of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in modern times that provides lay Catholics more opportunities for engagement in Church life. Prior to this teaching, the laity or the ordinary baptized members of the RCC is often seen by people as a submissive community of believers to the directives of the Catholic hierarchy. The laity is simply regarded by priests and bishops as an obedient and subservient flock. Thus, an earlier document by Pope Pius X entitled Vehementer Nos [On the French Law of Separation] (1906), for instance, taught that the duty of the laity is to allow themselves to be led and, like a docile flock, follow their pastors (Pius, 1906). Doohan (1992) explains that the:

Neoplatonism’s influence on several Church Fathers, the growth of monasticism, and the development of the clerical dimension of the Church have given the laity the image of second-class citizens because of their involvement with the material world which was thought to make them profane, the equation of holiness with monasticism thus introducing a minimalist approach to lay spirituality, and the introduction of a grading or ranking of Church membership that left the laity in the subordinate position and powerless. (Doohan, 1992, p. 169)

The old joke that the bishops “teach, rule, and sanctify” while the laity “pray, pay, and obey” captures this pre-Vatican II imagery on the laity’s passive role and subservience to the hierarchy (Bombongan, 2008, p. 210). Because of this passive role, the ministerial priesthood became the exclusive locus of the ecclesial ministry in the RCC (Connolly, 2004, p. 273). The Catholic laity is simply relegated as a collaborator of the clergy and recipient of the hierarchy’s ministry (Lumen Gentium, 1964, para. 37).

But this old relationship is said to have been radically changed with Vatican II’s renewed teaching on lay empowerment. With the Council’s emphasis on the common priesthood of all baptized Catholics and on the image of the Church as the “People of God,” Vatican II is said to have made the Catholic laity and clergy more equal in the eyes of God. In its teaching on the common priesthood of all believers, it decreed that both the laity and the clergy share the same dignity and responsibility as Christian witnesses of Christ’s Church, participating in the one royal priesthood of Christ (Lumen Gentium, 1964, para. 10). Indeed, Lumen Gentium [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] (Paul, 1964), together with the document Apostolicam Actuositatem [Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity] (Paul, 1965), are said to be the two major documents of Vatican II that improved the relationship between the clergy and the laity, giving the latter more participation in the ecclesial life of the RCC.

Despite this monumental achievement of Vatican II, lay Catholics’ engagement in the Church remains limited. In the light of the growing clerical sexual abuse (CSA) in the Catholic Church, it becomes apparent that the Catholic laity has no power to officially investigate abusive priests and impose sanctions in the name of the RCC. With the passive role of the laity in various ecclesial investigations on CSA committed by priests and bishops, it became apparent that Vatican II’s lay empowerment is not enough to sanction clerical sexual misconduct.
Historically, the CSA in the RCC started to erupt in the United States (US) in 1984 with the publicized case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthe, a diocesan priest of Lafayette who committed a series of child sexual abuse from 1970s to 1980s. This was followed by a series of reports on CSA by Boston Globe that led to an almost hysterical public reaction to the growing discoveries of clerical sexual misconduct and cover-ups by bishops and church officials. This intense public interest on CSA has been fueled by highly publicized media reports, investigations, and revelations of sexual abuse committed by more than 3,700 clerics against an estimated 16,000 victims (Bishop Accountability, 2011; Bohm et al., 2014).

The Catholic CSA scandals did not end in the US. Media reports and investigations began to spread around the world. Terry (2015) admitted that sexual misconduct of priests, especially against children and minors, is a global concern. Initial reports on CSA in 2002 gave an impression that sexual abuse by priests in the RCC only occurred in the US. However, as more and more stories and investigations on CSA are published in the media, it gradually appeared that clerical sexual misconduct is happening around the world by 2010 (Ballano, 2019, p. 2). In the midst of all these CSA, cover-ups by bishops to avoid public scandals emerged as a common pattern. The Catholic laity, except the victims and their relatives and supporters, is generally passive and inhibited to take drastic moves within the Church to prevent CSA. Thus, one wonders: Is the empowerment given by Vatican II sociologically sufficient to allow the Catholic laity to address the growing CSA problem in the RCC?

The general objective of this article is to analyze Vatican II’s renewed teaching on lay empowerment: whether it is sociologically adequate for the Catholic laity to address the widening CSA in the RCC. Its sources of data and materials include some secondary sociological and social science literature and past studies on power, empowerment, and Catholic clerical sexual abuse. It also cites some papal, conciliar, and canonical documents on lay empowerment, common priesthood, and celibacy. In particular, the two major documents of Vatican II on lay empowerment such as Apostolicam Actuositatem [Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity] and Lumen Gentium [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World] are given a special focus in the sociological analysis to understand the Council’s teaching on lay empowerment.

This article has four major parts that correspond to its four specific aims, namely to: (i) provide a brief sociological and social science review on power and empowerment as the study’s theoretical orientation to analyze the RCC’s power structure and Vatican II’s decree on lay empowerment; (ii) assess the Council’s lay empowerment and power-sharing scheme in its teaching on common priesthood, ecclesial political structure, and celibacy; (iii) explain how celibacy and the lack of social bonding among diocesan priests have contributed to CSA; and (iv) apply the social bonding theory to explain how married priesthood can provide priests with greater social attachment and social controls which can inhibit CSA as well as empower the laity in the RCC.

Overall, this article argues that a “real” lay empowerment requires a significant power sharing between the Catholic hierarchy and the laity. It also implies amending the celibacy rule and allowing married priesthood in the RCC to provide greater social bonding and social controls to diocesan priests against CSA and to enable the laity to formally regulate clerical behavior involving sexual misconduct. A realistic lay empowerment should allow the Catholic laity to join in the Church’s governance system to strengthen the ecclesial system of checks and balances to inhibit clerical misconduct.

2. Theoretical underpinning: power and empowerment in the social sciences
One of the contested concepts in the social sciences and sociology is empowerment. At the core of the concept is the idea of power. “Power is usually defined behaviorally, as the ability of one actor—individual or collective—to affect the actions of another” (Pigg, 2002, p. 109). The often-quoted definition of power in sociology comes from the German sociologist Max Weber who defines it as the ability of one actor to overcome another despite resistance (Weber, 1978, p. 180). To him, power becomes authority if it is legitimized by people. Social scientists recognize that power and
authority exist within the context of a relationship between people or things. Power does not exist in isolation nor inherent in individuals. It is created in relationships. Lukes (1974, p. 22) also sees power, not just a “series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individual inaction.”

“Empowerment, on the other hand, which is rooted in the idea of power, generally implies providing the means of exerting or asserting power as a behavior practiced by individuals” (Pigg, 2002, p. 109). “Empowerment is a cross-disciplinary concept that is relevant in psychology, political science, public policy, organizational behavior, health, education, economics, and many other fields of study” (Dolničar & Fortunati, 2014, p. 165). In political sociology, it is a well-established principle that empowerment of the poor and the weak is normally the product of a struggle” (Esman, 2003, p. 1). Kabeer (1994) views empowerment as a process of change, which can only become meaningful if there is a transfer of power. To him, “empowerment involves the ability to make choices and entails a process of change from being without (sufficient) power to make choices to having sufficient power to do so” (Kabeer, 1994).

Empowerment can be individual and communal. An individual empowerment refers to the processes which strengthen individuals’ resources for personal decisions and critical thinking (Wallerstein, 1992), mastery of essential activities (Bandura, 1989; Gist, 1987) and resulting in attainment of goals (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008; Hur, 2006). A communal empowerment, on the other hand, refers to the techniques, conditions, group structures formal practices, and informal techniques and competencies essential for group empowerment (e.g., Boehm & Staples, 2002; Conger & Canungo, 1988; Hu & Leung, 2003). “The typical communal empowerment are “social cohesion, sense of community, community building, coalition building, collective belonging, group support, community engagement, and involvement in and control over organization in the community” (Dolničar & Fortunati, 2014, p. 166).

Finally, empowerment is an outcome of interpersonal (mutual empowerment) and collective social action (social empowerment) (Pigg, 2001). It is a collective social process of creating a community, achieving better control over the environment, and decision-making in which groups, organizations or communities participate. It also includes organizational processes and structures that enhance member participation and improve organizational effectiveness for goal achievement (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 44). As a whole, scholars agree that empowerment implies sharing of power from one person or group to another. Kirkman and Rosen (1999), for instance, argue that power-sharing has two basic forms: delegation of authority and participative decision-making. In an organization. Empowering processes include collective decision-making and shared leadership (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 570).

In the RCC, a real empowerment in the sociological sense implies allowing the Catholic laity to be represented in ecclesial decision-making processes and participate in the internal management of the official Church. In particular, it requires that the laity, which constitutes more than 90% of the Church members, to partake in ecclesial governance by permitting married priesthood (Ballano, 2019). The current governance system only allows celibate clerics to manage the RCC. Thus, a true and effective lay empowerment can imply a fundamental restructuring of the Church’s administration to allow the laity a greater participation in the ecclesial management and supervision of the clergy to prevent CSA. Because Vatican II is seen by Catholic theologians and lay leaders as a radical council, one may inquire: Did the council fathers extend the necessary power and authority to the laity to achieve this end?

3. Analyzing Vatican II’s lay empowerment
Vatican II is perceived by many Catholics as introducing radical changes in the RCC as a response to the “signs of the times.” Analyzing the conciliar documents Apostolicam Actusitatem [Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity] and Lumen Gentium [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] is
significant to understand the type of empowerment Vatican II has shared to the laity. These documents enjoin the laity to be more involved in Church life. Specifically, they inspire lay Catholics to be more active in the parishes and dioceses of the local church by acting as lay ministers, parish or diocesan officers in the local parish and diocesan councils, consultants in local plenary councils, leaders in pastoral projects, or even as officers in some Vatican offices. But two important aspects of these conciliar decrees need sociological analysis to ascertain whether Vatican II has indeed given the Catholic laity substantial empowerment, enough to overcome CSA crisis of the Church in contemporary times: lay participation in the priesthood of Christ and formal governance of the Church as well as the Council’s attitude to celibacy.

The RCC is a sacramental church whose spiritual leadership is intrinsically connected with the priesthood (Daly, 2009). Thus, it is crucial to understand whether Vatican II has given the laity a strong participation in Christ’s priesthood. Moreover, if empowerment implies sharing of power and participation in decision-making, it is also significant to sociologically inquire whether the Council has changed the governance structure of the Church to give way to greater lay empowerment in ecclesial life. Lastly, one cannot truly talk of lay empowerment without dealing with the issue of mandatory celibacy for priests, which effectively blocks lay participation in church governance.

3.1. Lay participation in the royal priesthood of Christ
Vatican II is also seen by many as a radical council which promoted equality between the clergy and the laity through its emphasis on the common priesthood of all believers in the Church. Thus, Lumen Gentium (1964, para. 10) recognized that all baptized believers are equal since they all participate in Christ’s royal priesthood. Like ordained clerics, lay people are now acknowledged as “priests” with full membership in the Church by virtue of their baptism (Weidner, 2017).

But analyzing Vatican II’s teaching on lay involvement in the Church using the sociological lens indicates that this empowerment falls short of the sociological standard of empowerment. The common priesthood advocated by the Council does not imply that the lay members are now priests like the clergy who can exercise ecclesial governance in the RCC. Although Lumen Gentium (1964) acknowledges that both the laity and the clergy participate in one priesthood of Christ, the new Code of Canon Law (CCL) still distinguishes two forms of priesthood: the general priesthood of the laity and the ministerial priesthood of the ordained bishops and priests (Code of Canon Law, 1983, para. 1008). Despite Vatican II’s decree on lay empowerment, the power of governance in the RCC according to the new Code of Canon Law (CCL) is still in the hands of ordained ministers by divine institution:

Those who have received sacred orders are qualified, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction (Can. 129 §1).

The laity’s priesthood is of general character where all baptized Catholics share, while ministerial priesthood is of special type, which is reserved only to celibate and ordained priests in the RCC. Unlike the common priesthood, clerical priesthood bestows upon the candidate the power to celebrate the sacraments and directly manage the Church. The former only grants the laity the power to coordinate with priests and bishops in ecclesial affairs with no direct authority to administer the church bureaucracy.

In sociology, empowerment is understood as a political process that is centered on power sharing. Its essence lies in the dynamics of sharing, distribution, and redistribution of power. Thus, it requires power change. If power cannot change and inherent in positions or people, then empowerment is neither possible nor conceivable in any meaningful way (Page & Czuba, 1999). If the laity cannot participate in ministerial priesthood, which is a requirement to truly participate in ecclesial governance, then, in essence, there was no actual transfer of power in
Vatican II’s lay empowerment. Lifting the rule on mandatory celibacy to allow the laity to become priests in the Church could have been a radical move of the Council if it really aims to empower lay Catholics.

3.2. The Church’s governance structure after Vatican II

Another area that needs to be examined to know whether Vatican II’s lay empowerment is significant is investigating the ecclesial political structure after the Council. The adoption of the church model of “People of God” is indicative that Vatican II is serious in trying to make things equal between the laity and the clergy as they are all baptized in the name of Christ. Although Apostolicam Actuositatem encouraged greater lay participation in ecclesial life, Lumen Gentium retained the RCC’s strictly hierarchical power structure in the ecclesial administration. The governance of the entire Church is still in the hands of ordained celibate clerics. Under this set-up, lay members cannot act as ministers and political leaders in the Church without ordination. Lumen Gentium is firm that the laity must obey their priests or shepherds as rulers in the Church:

The laity ... should openly reveal to them [spiritual shepherds] their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children ... The laity should ... promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds, since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church. Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church.

Let them willingly employ their prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative (Paul, 1964, para. 37).

This text indicated that Vatican II recognized the laity's responsibility in the Church. But the Lumen Gentium’s use of the terms “children” and “rulers” still manifested the superiority of ordained ministers or shepherds over the laity. Despite the fact that lay people can now become more involved in the Church, Lumen Gentium continues to regard the clergy as the only political leader in the RCC. This is shrined in the new CCL after Vatican II. To become a formal leader in the Church means reception of the sacrament of holy orders or ordination. The CCL states that: “In accord with the prescription of law, those who received sacred orders are capable of the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction” (Code of Canon Law, 1983, para. 129 §1). Lay members, except married deacons, who do not receive the sacrament of holy orders are disqualified to take the power of jurisdiction in the Church. They cannot directly participate in the formal ecclesial governance (Code of Canon Law, 1983, para. 129 §2), although they can act as collaborators of the clerics’ exercise of ecclesial power (Shaw, 2008).

There is no shared decision-making and leadership among the three major types of members in the RCC: the clergy, religious, and laity. As a global religious institution, the RCC’s has a hierarchical power structure with the clergy as the ruling elite: the Pope occupying the highest authority, followed by cardinals, bishops, priests, and deacons. This hierarchy, which constitutes a minuscule fraction (.00042%) of the world’s Catholic population, is considered the ruling group in the Church (Doyle, 2006). In the RCC, no Catholics can directly govern the Church without celibacy and ordination. Despite the empowerment given by Vatican II to the laity, the power of governance, according to the new Code of Canon Law (CCL), is still given to ordained clerics by divine institution:

Those who have received sacred orders are qualified, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction (Code of Canon Law, 1983, para. 129 §1).
In dioceses, only bishops, assisted by their priests, have the absolute power to govern the local church. It is clear in theological and catechetical writings, church law, and liturgical practice, that the bishops are the direct descendants of the apostles (Doyle, 2006, p. 190). “The Catholic Church has taught for centuries that priests are men set apart from and above others. The difference begins with ordination. At that moment, by divine action, the man is made a priest and is joined to Christ in such a way that he is substantially different from other human beings” (Benkert & Doyle, 2009, p. 228).

If the essence of empowerment is power sharing, then obviously Vatican II’s lay empowerment is sociological lacking with regard to participation in the priesthood and ecclesial governance. To know whether the laity is truly empowered by Vatican II is to inquire if the laity can now occupy some ecclesial positions enjoyed by the clergy in the official Church. Sheldrake (1994) argues:

For to empower all involves shedding power by the few who traditionally exercised it exclusively. This touches not only on who has a public ministry or access to theological education. It also relates to the continued absence of married experience among established decision-makers. (Sheldrake, 1994, p. 33)

3.3. Celibacy and lay empowerment

One last area to be analyzed to understand the true nature of Vatican II’s lay empowerment is the Council’s stance towards mandatory celibacy. Celibacy is the last frontier that blocks the laity’s participation in church governance, hindering lay Catholics to effectively respond to CSA. Before mandatory celibacy was universally imposed by the RCC in 14th century, the laity can always join the official church governance and hierarchy by becoming ordained priests without necessarily observing celibacy and abandoning their families.

“During the early years of Christianity, celibacy was only a voluntary ascetic practice of early Christian monks and some clerics, but not universally required for Catholic priests. It was only after the Church’s Second Lateran Council in 1339 that mandatory celibacy became a norm” (Ballano, 2019, p. 62). Later, the Council of Trent in 1563 reestablished it and Vatican II preserved it up to the present times (Owen, 2001). This adoption of mandatory celibacy by the RCC resulted in a strict separation between the clergy and the laity.

Many Catholics view Vatican II as a progressive council that introduced sweeping reforms in the RCC. In fact, thousands of Catholic priests left the Church because of their discontent with the Council’s reforms (Nunez, 2010). Despite this, Vatican II is not radical enough to allow the laity to participate directly in managing the Church. O’Collins (2012) characterized Vatican II’s reforms as one of “continuity and discontinuity”. There are beliefs and practices which are continued and discontinued after the Council. Vatican II “discontinued” the view on the laity as totally dependent on the hierarchy by allowing lay people to take more responsibilities in the Church and partake in the priesthood of Christ’s priesthood like clerics (Lumen Gentium, 1964, para. 37). However, it did continue to endorse celibate priesthood, totally shutting out the possibility of the laity’s direct participation in ecclesial governance. After Vatican II, there is still no “married clerics, married lay people, and much less, women, who hold any positions of power anywhere in the Catholic Church” (Doyle, 2006, p. 150).

Vatican II did not go to the extent of adopting optional or married priesthood to allow the laity to directly participate in Church administration and empower them to monitor priestly behavior against sexual misconduct (Lumen Gentium, 1964, para. 18–20, Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992, para. 1579). CSA, especially child sexual abuse, is not only prevalent in the RCC but also in Protestant and Christian churches (Denney et al., 2018). However, the RCC is the only Christian denomination in the world that demands celibacy and encounters widespread accusation of CSA at the same time.
“Celibacy” comes from the Latin word “coelebs”, which means an unmarried man. “Celibacy is a publicly committed state of living chastely, whereby the person, accepting the gift of God and identifying with Jesus Christ, freely chooses not to marry for the sake of the kingdom of God while serving God and other people” (Daly, 2009, p. 21). In the RCC, celibacy is mandatory to “make sacred ministers adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity (Code of Canon Law, 1983, para. 227).

Recently, the issue of mandatory celibacy was in the limelight with the convocation of the Synod of Bishops to address priest shortage in the Amazon region by Pope Francis at the Vatican last 6 October 2019. This synod has awakened the old debate on mandatory celibacy and married priesthood. Its final voting showed that a great majority of bishops and participants endorsed married priesthood with 128 yes votes and 41 no votes (McElwee & Brian, 2019). But viewed by many as a way of putting pressure on Pope Francis not to follow the synod’s recommendation, Cardinal Robert Sarah and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI published a book entitled “From the Depths of Our Hearts” that defended celibacy on the eve of Pope Francis’s closing synod exhortation “Beloved Amazon.” Eventually, the recommendation for married priesthood to address priest shortage in the Amazon region was rejected by Pope Francis (Winfield, 2020), but it kept alive the perennial question on the propriety of mandated celibacy for priests in the RCC. Is celibacy really a fundamental requisite for the priesthood since the time of Christ?

Despite all the arguments in favor of celibacy, the fact remains that Christ himself advocates optional celibacy (Matthew 19: 3–12). “As a matter of fact, the Church today acknowledges that no law of celibacy as we know it today existed in the beginning” (Daniel, 2012). Although celibacy is not a biblical and doctrinal teaching but a creation of ecclesial law, the Catholic hierarchy continues to portray it as essential to priesthood and priestly life. It often cites some Biblical texts and traditional statements that view celibacy as the better choice for priests as it frees them from concerns of marriage and children, making them more devoted to God and mature in spiritual life (Swenson, 1998). Thus, the RCC requires all clerics to practice celibacy as God’s special gift:

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are obliged to observe celibacy, which is a special gift of God, by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and can more freely dedicate themselves to the service of God and humankind (Code of Canon Law, 1983, para. 277).

Aside from seeing celibacy as God’s gift, Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical Sacerdotalis Caelibatus [Celibacy of the Priest] also viewed celibacy as God’s “brilliant jewel” and officially rejected calls to reassess it, enjoining all bishops, priests, and the whole Catholic world to retain its value even if the “outlook of men and the state of the world have undergone such profound changes” (Sacerdotalis Caelibatus, 1967, para. 1). “This famous depiction of celibacy, as the most ‘brilliant jewel’ in the crown of the priesthood has been echoed in addresses and encyclicals ever since and continues to be one of the most intriguing and dominant metaphors for its understanding in theological debates” (Mayblin, 2018, p. 5). To the Catholic hierarchy, living a life of complete sexual abstinence implies a complete service to God in the ministry (Issaco et al., 2015).

4. Celibacy and CSA
Empirical evidence shows that priests remain human and do not possess superior spirituality over the laity after ordination and taking the vow of celibacy. To Thomas Doyle (2006), celibacy is only a sort of clerical garb that strengthens the fantasy that priests are special beings in the Church, making them different from lay people, fortifying clerical secrecy, and increasing the glamour of priestly life. In reality, ordination does not make priests a superhuman group in the Church. Priests and bishops remain mortal beings despite being ordained and consecrated in the RCC (Doyle, 2006).
A research by Swenson (1998) participated by 1294 predominantly married Christian pastors and 80 Catholic clerics in Canada, showed no significant relationship between celibacy and spirituality. “There is also a shred of ample historical evidence to clearly demonstrate that priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes remain human in spite of the vow of celibacy and the sacred ceremonies that elevate them to their lofty positions” (Doyle, 2006, p. 150). Empirical studies in psychiatric, psychological, sociological, and other social science disciplines strongly point to celibacy as a difficult hurdle for priests to live a happy and healthy psycho-spiritual life, free from clerical sexual abuse (Schep-Hughes & Devine, 2003; Sipe, 1990). To the priest therapist Kenneth Adams (2011), celibacy is like a lock and key that prevents the unresolved personal issues of priests after ordination from surfacing and being resolved during the ministry. To him, vulnerable individuals who enter the priesthood with an arrested identity due to serious unresolved issues of family origin or overt sexual abuse issues that make bonding and attaching difficult, would find it tough to resolve them once they become priests without violating celibacy (Adams, 2011, p. 92).

Despite the persistence of the celibacy debate in the RCC, there is a dearth of empirical studies that relate celibacy to the growing problem of clerical sexual misconduct in the Church (Ballano, 2019). The current major literature on CSA, mostly psychological in approach, avoids relating CSA to celibacy (e.g., Plante, 2020; Plante & Aldridge, 2005; Sipe, 1995). The Catholic hierarchy also refuses to relate clerical celibacy to sexual misconduct of priests, although some scholars (e.g., Ballano, 2019; Schep-Hughes & Devine, 2003; Wills, 2000) and investigative bodies (e.g., Royal Commission 2017)4 identified celibacy as a significant cause of CSA in the RCC. Sipe (1995) argued that in an ecclesial culture of secrecy where nobody is allowed to have sex, priests hide their sexual misconduct. His research “A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy,” blamed celibacy as a major cause of CSA in the Church. He calculated that about 50% of the clerical population are sexually active and 6% are pedophiles (Sipe, 1990).

The John Jay College of Criminal Justice (2004), which was commissioned by American bishops to study the CSA in the US, also insinuated that clerical sexual misconduct and other clerical problems could have been alleviated if celibacy is optional in the Church. Finally, Schep-Hughes and Devine (2003, p. 20), summarizing Wills's (2000) view, aptly argued the relationship between mandatory celibacy and sexual abuse:

... [S]exual abuse has everything to do with mandatory celibacy. In his view the mantle and aura of prestige that has been accorded to Catholic priests allowed them to be treated for generations as special agents of God, as mediators between ordinary humans and the divine. Celibacy endowed Catholic priests with awesome, almost magical, power and authority. Celibate priests were not ‘ordinary men’. It is this aura, this ‘mystical halo’, that the pedophile priests have taken advantage of to gain easy access to naive religious families and their vulnerable children. And it is just this powerful aura that the American bishops want to protect. Hence the cover-ups, the secrecy, and the stonewalling of prosecutors ... [C] elibacy is appropriate to the monastic life and to the traditional desert theology tradition where meditation, contemplation and worship are the central features of daily life ... In the contemporary context, celibacy seems little more than a cultural survival and rather than an aid to spiritual growth it may be a primary obstacle to it (Schep-Hughes & Devine, 2003, pp. 29–30).

A closer look at the RCC’s history reveals that obligatory celibacy is not a prerequisite for the priesthood. “Evidence is abundant that mandatory celibacy was a late entry into Christianity, and did not exist in the second or third centuries. As a matter of fact, the Church today acknowledges that no law of celibacy as we know it today existed in the beginning” (Daniel, 2012, p. 89). Lea (2003) and Sipe (1990) argue that the apostolic church did not require celibacy for the leaders, but freely decided by early church leaders themselves. St. Peter, the “First Pope”, and some other apostles appeared to have had normal genital relations with their wives throughout their ministry and never abandoned their families (Crosby, 2003, p. 8). St. Paul too did not impose celibacy to his
disciples as an obligation coming from Christ but only as an advice or option as he saw marriage as unnecessary with his belief on the imminent coming of the end times (Crosby, 2003, p. 4).

The early celibate priests were also married, had raised their children and became widowed before professing celibacy (Brown, 2008). The early Church Fathers were also not celibate (Mayblin, 2018). So, if celibacy in the RCC has no doctrinal or biblical basis and inconsistently observed by priests since the time of Christ, why is it that the Catholic hierarchy continues to defend it and disallow married priesthood, a move which could really empower the laity in the Church?

5. Married priesthood and inhibition of CSA

CSA is usually committed in situations where priests are alone with their victims, without guardians that look out their daily behavior. The John Jay College study (2004), for instance, reported that 41% of all CSA cases happened in the priest’s residence privately. The bishop who is supposed to be the guardian and father of diocesan priests is often a distant figure in the diocese. Thus, CSA cases are often kept secret by perpetrators and confessed to their fellow priests. It is easier to reveal their misconduct to their fellow priests in the sacrament of penance because of secrecy guaranteed by the seal of confession (Code of Canon Law, 1983, para. 983–984).

Intimate and support groups are important for diocesan priests to overcome loneliness and spiritual dryness (Büssing et al., 2017; Schnabel & Koval, 1979) and to inhibit CSA in the local church (Ballano, 2019). Thus, married priesthood and family life can impart direct social control to the daily routine of priests, which markedly impede sexual abuse to their parishioners. Specifically, spouses and children of priests can also produce informal monitoring for clerical behavior while they are in the ministry. Moreover, familial and social network ties among clerical families can also intensify this informal social control against CSA in dioceses. Some research showed that the lack of lay and family guardians who would supervise clerical activities, priest predators often find more opportunities to be alone with their victims (Donze, 2018; John Jay College, 2004; Sipe, 1990). Therefore, if marriage priesthood is permitted in the RCC, the absolute privacy enjoyed by celibate priests would be minimized. The clerics’ wives and children can directly and indirectly act as guardians who will monitor their daily activities, decreasing the opportunities for CSA.

Married priesthood can, therefore, produce the essential social controls to counteract CSA in the Church. Gurvitch and Moore defined social control as:

...the sum total or rather the whole cultural patterns, social symbols, collective spiritual meanings, values, ideals, as well as acts and processes directly connected with them, whereby, inclusive of society, every particular group and every participating member overcome tensions and conflicts within themselves through temporary equilibria and take steps for new creative efforts. (Sharma, 2007, p. 221)

In short, it refers to the system of “measures, suggestion, persuasion, restraint, and coercion” which coerces individuals to conform to conventional behavior (Sharma, 2007). It can be direct and indirect. Direct social control is exerted on a person by members of a primary or intimate group, such as immediate family members (Umberson, 1987), while indirect social control is experienced through informal pressures to conform to conventional norms in the local community through the family (Sydlitz, 1993; Umberson, 1987). Mannheim (1940) classically views indirect social control as a result of a pressure from secondary groups to individuals to conform to conventional behavior. In married priesthood, the spouses and children of priests as well as their networks of families can exert direct and indirect social controls to clerical life to hinder CSA.

6. The social bonding theory and the solitary clerical life

In the RCC, CSA is related to the lack of social support and bonding in diocesan priesthood. Hoge’s (2002) study involving newly ordained secular priests, for instance, confirmed the perception that priestly life is difficult because of loneliness and lack of social attachment with fellow priests, which
has a direct effect on the resignation from the active ministry and mediates other factors involved in the decision to remain in and to leave the priesthood. In another study of Hoge and others (1995) discovered that the main sources of clerical stress included loneliness, together with the lack of communal support, and encouragement from fellow priests, and leadership from those in authority (Raj & Dean, 2005, p. 159).

Sociological theories on deviance often identify social bonding and communal support as crucial in the inhibition of deviance and criminality. One of such theories is the social bonding theory (SBT). SBT is a theory which attempts to explain why individuals choose to conform to conventional norms. Its main proponent, Travis Hirchi (2002), identified four crucial social bonds in society which can inhibit deviance and criminality: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. The more people attach to these bonds in society, the more they would likely conform to societal norms and expectations. SBT is often applied by sociologists and criminologists in their studies to explain why people break rules. Two of these social bonds, namely, attachment and involvement, can be useful in explaining why diocesan priests commit CSA in the RCC.

“Attachment” refers to close affectional relationships with others and the extent to which an individual cares about others’ expectations (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Individuals who are insensitive to society’s opinions or judgments have weakened bonds with society. Involvement, on the other hand, refers to investing time in pro-social activities, such as education and/or work (Akers & Sellers, 2004). To be busy with these activities would mean fewer opportunities to commit deviance (Durkin et al., 1999; Travis, 2002).

Diocesan priests usually profess a strong commitment to their vocation and belief in ecclesial authority (Cornelio, 2012). They take the religious vow of obedience to their bishops as their priesthood depends on the plenary priesthood of their bishops. What is lacking in their diocesan clerical life is a strong attachment to their clerical community and involvement in diocesan priestly activities, which can enable them to overcome loneliness, spiritual dryness, and CSA. According to Weiss (1973, pp. 9–27), loneliness occurs when one experiences a deficit in the fulfillment of the need for human attachment and for engaging social networks or socially integrating relationships, or both. In the RCC, celibate secular priests experience loneliness as well as lack of direct guardians against CSA, owing to the absence of intimate social bonding, which can inhibit sexual deviance.

In general, secular priests live autonomous lives with minimal supervision by their bishops and fellow priests in their parishes. This often leads to little support for their financial, pastoral, and personal needs. In his qualitative study on priestly satisfaction in one rural diocese in the Philippines, for instance, Joyeel Cornelio (2012) discovered that some clerics felt that they were being neglected by their bishop and fellow clerics concerning their personal and pastoral needs. It also revealed that they felt not being listened to by their bishop and diocesan superiors, thus resulting in distrust and social gap between them and their diocesan superiors.

Using the sociological lens of SBT, marital and family disruption or absence of marital relations caused by obligatory celibacy can lead to social detachment and loss of direct and indirect social controls at the community level, especially if celibacy can lead to spiritual dryness for priests (Baumann et al., 2019). A strong spirituality and communal bonding are important to maintain a celibate life. But this seems not the case for diocesan priests. With the lack of opportunities for social interaction and social bonding among clerics in their dioceses, absence of intimate groups due to celibacy, and passive role of the laity against CSA, priests relatively live an unrestrained private life in the diocese. Thus, married priesthood and family life, whether heterosexual or homosexual, can provide secular priests a strong sense of companionship and social bonding which can eventually discourage them to commit sexual abuse. If allowed by the RCC, same-sex marriage for priests can also minimize CSA against men. Sipe (1990) asserted that there are gay priests and bishops in the Church who have illicit union and affairs with men while in the ministry.
Scientific research on CSA revealed a connection between a weak social bonding between bishops and their priests and the lack of lay supervision of clerical behavior as causing CSA (Ballano, 2019; John Jay College, 2004). This type of situation is prone to deviance. Individuals who lack social bonding as well as internal and external social control are always seen by sociologists and criminologists as prone to criminality and rule-breaking behavior (e.g., Conger, 1976; Matsueda, 1982; Nijdam-Jones et al., 2015). The persistence of CSA in diocesan priesthood discloses something that is beyond psychological and psychiatric problems of the clergy. It reveals a significant structural flaw in the Church’s social bonding and social control systems to address sexual abuse. It manifests a defect in the ecclesial system of checks and balances between the various types of members in the RCC. Because of celibacy, strict separation between the clergy and the laity, and monopoly of ecclesiial power by the hierarchy, lay members which constitute more than 99% of church believers cannot officially sanction erring priests committing CSA in the RCC (Ballano, 2019).

A true lay empowerment as proposed by Vatican II should have had included married priesthood or optional celibacy and power sharing between some competent laity and the Catholic hierarchy to address the continuing CSA in the RCC. Married priesthood or optional celibacy would allow the laity to participate in Church governance and to supervise clerical behavior and officially investigate CSA. Lay empowerment that includes the power to make binding decisions in parishes and dioceses is needed now more than ever to address the growing scandal of CSA in the RCC.

7. Summary and conclusion
This article has shown that Vatican II’s teaching lay empowerment gave the lay Catholics more pastoral responsibilities in the RCC, but did not allow them to participate in the official governance of the Church, a move which could have made the empowerment more meaningful in the sociological sense. The Council did not alter the hierarchical ecclesial structure nor amend the celibacy rule to allow the laity to join in ecclesial administration. Despite the teaching on the common priesthood and encouragement of Vatican II for lay engagement in the Church, the celibate and ordained clerics still occupy the highest authority in the Catholic hierarchy and control ecclesial power. The laity remains collaborators and passive recipient of clerical ministry. Despite its sweeping reforms in the Church, Vatican II’s lay empowerment still did not allow power-sharing in the church governance between the clergy and the laity.

The widening CSA in the RCC and the apparent passivity of the laity to monitor clerical behavior and sanction abusive priests imply that the lay empowerment of Vatican II falls short of a “real” empowerment. Lumen Gentium and CCL retained the separation of the laity and the clergy and continued to reserve church governance only to those who received ordination and professed celibacy. A meaningful lay empowerment necessitates a notable transfer of ecclesial power from the Catholic hierarchy to lay leaders, suggesting the adoption of a married priesthood to enable the laity to join in the internal church management and help fight effectively against the growing scandal of CSA in the RCC worldwide. In most CSA cases, the laity is passive and dependent on the clergy’s authority. Only the ordained Catholic hierarchy can make decision in the Church regarding CSA.

Celibacy, which has no biblical and doctrinal basis and imposed only as a discipline during the 14th century, hinders the laity’s participation in ecclesial governance and its effective monitoring of clerical behavior and sanctioning of CSA in the RCC. Governance of the official Church is still reserved for the clergy according to the new CCL. Mandatory celibacy adds to the loneliness and solitary life of diocesan priests who, unlike religious clerics, do not have a cohesive religious community in the diocese. This lack of a strong social bonding and social controls that regulate the autonomous personal life of secular priests can encourage CSA in diocesan priesthood.

Applying Hirschi’s social bonding theory (SBT), social attachment of priests in their personal life is crucial in inhibiting CSA. Thus, married priesthood, which also gives the laity the opportunity to
participate directly in ecclesial governance, can provide a strong social attachment, intimacy, and direct and indirect social controls to diocesan clergy’s private life to resist sexual misconduct. Amending the celibacy rule is a crucial factor to truly empower the laity and address effectively the current CSA crisis in the RCC—a crucial issue which has not been addressed by Vatican II’s lay empowerment. Lay participation in ecclesial governance and the adoption of married celibacy are the two missing links of Vatican II’s lay empowerment that can effectively address the current CSA scandal in the Church.

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Notes
1. The Acadiana Advocate, 10 September 2014.
2. Last 21 December 2015, for instance, Pope Francis appointed two laymen Greg Burke, an American, and Stefano D’Agostini, an Italian—to key positions in the Vatican’s new communications operations as deputy director in the Holy See’s Press Office and as head of the Vatican’s Television Center respectively (O’Connell, 2015).
3. Through his personal personal secretary Archbishop Georg Gänswein, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI denied that he co-authored the book “From the Depths of Our Hearts and asked editors to remove his name from the book” (O’Connell, 2020).
4. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Abuse of Children, “Final Report Recommendations.” Retrieved 1 December 2019 from https://www.childabuse royalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_recommendations.pdf.

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