

# **NIAGARA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND VIEWS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH SEX ABUSE CRISIS**

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## Niagara University Students' Knowledge and Views of the Catholic Church Sex Abuse Crisis

### Section I: Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an examination of Niagara University students' knowledge and views of the sex abuse crisis and the Catholic Church's response. The data presented here are from a survey research project conducted with all Niagara students during the spring 2019 semester. Assessing young adults' knowledge and views on this issue, especially young adults attending a Catholic university in a diocese currently receiving scrutiny from the media and civil authorities, is crucial. Such knowledge can help inform university administration, as well as those in positions of pastoral care in general (e.g., campus ministers), as to the need for and potential content of forums and discussions designed to address this issue. More broadly, this study can begin to lay a foundation to understand the impact the crisis is having on young adults, and their religious faith and practice, both inside and outside the Church. To date this has not been studied systematically. Faith and spirituality comprise a key dimension of an individual's holistic development, and are issues with which many young adults grapple and experience change (e.g., Pargament et al., 2005; Smith, 2003; Smith and Snell, 2009; Stoppa and Lefkowitz, 2010), heightening the need to understand the impact of the crisis on this population.

A more detailed description of the methodology, including the sample and the survey questions used in the current report, will be presented in this section. Section 2 will present the data on students' knowledge of the issue and its importance to them, including whether or not there are differences among students of different religious affiliations. Section 3 will discuss students' views on the Church's response to allegations of clergy sex abuse, on whether or not leadership is taking appropriate steps towards prevention of future incidents, and on the impact the issue is having on the Church's credibility on matters of faith and morality. Whether or not these views differ by religious affiliation will also be discussed. Section 4 will present a discussion of student responses to the open-ended questions in which they were asked to share any additional thoughts on the issue. A discussion of the results, including limitations of the study, will be presented in Section 5.

### *Methodology*

#### Sample

As mentioned above, the data for this report are part of a survey research project conducted with all Niagara University students during the spring 2019 semester. A survey focusing on students' knowledge and views of the sex abuse crisis and the Church's response, and also containing questions on personal religious affiliation, practice, and salience, was emailed to all undergraduate and graduate students on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019 (see the Appendix for a copy of the full survey). A follow-up email was sent on February 19<sup>th</sup>. Students were informed in the emails about the purpose of the survey and that it was voluntary and anonymous. Also, as an incentive to participate, they were told they could enter a drawing to win one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards if they entered their email address after completing the survey. They were assured their email address would be stored in a separate data file and could in no way be associated with their responses to the survey questions.

A total of 898 students responded to the survey between February 6<sup>th</sup> and March 5<sup>th</sup>, when the survey was officially closed. Of the 898 respondents, 134 chose to not complete the questions about their knowledge and views of clergy sex abuse and the Church's response. This leaves a sample of 764 who did answer these questions and who thus comprise the sample for this report. Of these 764 respondents, 74% were female and ages ranged from 18 to 61 (average age = 22). In terms of race and ethnicity, 85% of the respondents identified as White, 5% as African-American, 3% as Hispanic, 4% as Asian, and 3% as Other. The respondents were relatively equally distributed across classes, with 19% being freshmen, 16% sophomore, 20% junior, 22% senior, and 23% graduate students.

Students were asked about their religious affiliation, with the options being "Catholic – Roman Catholic;" "Christian – non-Roman Catholic;" "Jewish;" "Muslim;" "Other;" and "None." Respondents could specify further if they chose "Other." Due to a low number of responses, the categories of Jewish and Muslim were combined with the Other category for the current analyses. Also, although technically not all respondents in the Christian – non-Roman Catholic category are Protestant, since for example a small portion could be Eastern Orthodox, for the sake of convenience the group will be referred to as Protestant in this report. 44.8% of students reported being Roman Catholic and approximately 27.1% reported being Protestant (Christian – non-Roman Catholic), for a total of nearly 72% who reported a Christian religious affiliation. 4.1% reported affiliation with another religion, approximately half of whom were Jewish or Muslim. 24% of respondents reported no religious affiliation.

### Survey Items

Although the full survey included items on students' knowledge and views of the issue of sex abuse and the Catholic Church, as well as questions about personal religious faith and practice and basic demographics, this report will focus on a subset of items concerning knowledge and views of sex abuse and the Church's response. These items are discussed below.

Students were first asked about their *knowledge of the issue* of sex abuse in the Catholic Church with the question, "How would you rate your knowledge about the issue of sex abuse in the Catholic Church?" with response categories ranging from "No Knowledge" to "Extensive Knowledge." They were then asked to identify their *sources of information* on the issue such as local media, national media, or family and friends, to name a few options. Students were next asked about the *importance of the issue* with the question, "How would you rate the importance of the issue to you, personally?" with response categories ranging from "Not at all Important" to "Very Important."

Following these initial items, students were then asked a series of questions concerning their views of the Church's response to allegations of clergy sex abuse, whether or not leadership is taking appropriate steps towards prevention of future incidents, and the impact the issue is having on the Church's credibility on matters of faith and morality. In regards to the *Church's response to allegations of clergy sex abuse* and the *prevention of future incidents*, students were asked their level of agreement with the statements, "In general, I think the leadership of the Catholic Church (such as bishops and archbishops) responds appropriately to allegations of clergy sex abuse," and, "In general, I think the leadership of the Catholic Church is taking appropriate steps to prevent future incidents of clergy sex abuse." In terms of the *impact of the issue on the Church's credibility*, students were asked their level of

agreement with the statements, “I believe this issue has reduced the Catholic Church’s credibility when speaking about matters of faith,” and “I believe this issue has reduced the Catholic Church’s credibility when speaking about matters of morality.” The response categories for all four of these items ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”

Finally, at two points in the survey students were given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions. Specifically, after the section of questions on their knowledge and views students were prompted with the item, “If you have any additional thoughts about the issue of sex abuse in the Catholic Church, including the Church’s response to it, or would like to elaborate on any of your answers above, please write in the space below.” At the end of the survey students were again prompted with the item, “If you have any additional thoughts or comments about any of the issues covered in this survey please write them in the space below.” Combined, these items generated 143 open-ended responses which will be discussed in Section 4.

## Section 2: Knowledge and Personal Importance of the Issue

Section 2 presents the data on students’ self-assessment of their level of knowledge about the sex abuse crisis and the Church’s response, the sources of that knowledge, and the personal importance of the issue. It also presents an examination of whether or not the level of knowledge and importance of the issue differed across the various religious affiliation groups.

### *Level and Sources of Knowledge*

Table 1 contains the details about students’ self-reported knowledge of the issue of sex abuse in the Catholic Church. 92.8% reported at least some knowledge (i.e., a score of 2 or higher), and more than 65% reported a moderate or higher level of knowledge (i.e., a score of 3 or higher).

Table 1. “How would you rate your level of knowledge about the issue of sex abuse and the Catholic Church?”

	<i>% of Respondents (n=764)</i>
<i>1-No knowledge</i>	7.2%
<i>2</i>	27.4%
<i>3</i>	46.6%
<i>4</i>	16.1%
<i>5-Extensive knowledge</i>	2.7%
	100%

Table 2 presents the data on level of knowledge by religious affiliation. Level of knowledge did differ significantly across religious affiliation ( $\chi^2 = 31.51$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Not surprisingly, although the vast majority of students reported at least some knowledge regardless of religious affiliation, Roman Catholic students reported the highest level of knowledge. 97% reported at least some knowledge and nearly 25% reported a level of either 4 or 5. The next closest group was students who reported no religious affiliation, with 93% reporting at least some knowledge and 18.8% reporting a 4 or 5.

Table 2. Level of Knowledge by Religious Affiliation

	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>1-No Knowledge</i>	3.0%	12.3%	9.7%	8.3%
<i>2</i>	23.1%	31.4%	35.5%	29.3%
<i>3</i>	51.6%	42.6%	38.7%	43.6%
<i>4</i>	18.4%	11.3%	16.1%	17.1%
<i>5-Extensive Knowledge</i>	3.9%	2.5%	0%	1.7%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2 = 31.51$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .01$

Table 3 contains the data on the sources of students’ knowledge about the issue. The numbers add to more than 100% as students could select more than one source. The most common sources were local and national media (including TV, print, or online), with each serving as a source for nearly 75% of students. The next most commonly reported source was social media (63.2%), with family and/or friends being the only other source indicated by more than half of the sample, at 50.4%. Parish priest and Catholic media (e.g., National Catholic Register, Catholic Digest, etc.) were among the least frequently cited sources, with slightly more than 11% of students reporting either one.

Table 3. Sources of Knowledge about the Issue of Sex Abuse and the Church’s Response

	<i>% of Respondents (n=764)</i>
<i>Local Media</i>	74.3%
<i>National Media</i>	73.4%
<i>Social Media</i>	63.2%
<i>Family and/or Friends</i>	50.4%
<i>Parish Priest</i>	11.3%
<i>Catholic Media</i>	11.1%
<i>Other</i>	4.1%

*Personal Importance of the Issue*

Table 4 contains the results for the question about the personal importance of the issue. It is clearly important to students at Niagara University, as nearly 45% indicated it was very important to them personally and more than 88% indicated it was either somewhat or very important. Separate analyses (not shown here) reveal that the students who responded “not sure” or “not at all important” tended to be those who also felt less informed. Specifically, those analyses showed that none of the students who reported a level of knowledge of 4 or 5 answered “not sure” in terms of importance, and only 3.3% answered “not at all important.” Further, only 2.2% of those who reported a level of knowledge of 3 answered “not sure,” and 3.9% responded “not at all important.” Thus, the overwhelming pattern is that the more knowledge students felt they had about the issue the less likely they were to be unsure of its importance to them or to feel it was not at all important.

Table 4. “How would you rate the importance of this issue to you, personally?”

	<i>% of Respondents (n=764)</i>
<i>Not sure</i>	5.6%
<i>Not at all important</i>	6.3%
<i>Somewhat important</i>	43.7%
<i>Very important</i>	44.4%
	100%

As can be seen in Table 5, the personal importance of the issue did differ significantly across religious affiliation ( $\chi^2 = 33.86$ ;  $df = 9$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Students without any religious affiliation were the most likely to report it was not at all important to them, although the proportion who did so was still under 10%, and 34.8% considered the issue to be very important to them. Among students with a religious affiliation, Roman Catholics were the most likely to report the issue was very important to them at 53.1%, and were the least likely to consider it not at all important at 3.6%. They were followed closely by students with a religious affiliation of Other with 51.6% considering it very important, and 6.5% responding it was not at all important to them personally.

Table 5. Importance of the Issue by Religious Affiliation

	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Not sure</i>	3.9%	10.3%	0%	5.0%
<i>Not at all important</i>	3.6%	7.4%	6.5%	9.4%
<i>Somewhat important</i>	39.5%	44.1%	41.9%	50.8%
<i>Very important</i>	53.1%	38.2%	51.6%	34.8%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2 = 33.86$ ;  $df = 9$ ;  $p < .001$

### Section 3: Views on the Church’s Response and Credibility on Matters of Faith and Morality

This section presents the data concerning the students’ views on the appropriateness of the Church’s response to allegations of clergy sex abuse and efforts at prevention of future incidents, as well as their views on the broader implications of the issue for the Church’s credibility on matters of faith and morality. It also presents a comparison of students’ views across religious affiliation groups.

#### *Views on the Church’s Response and Steps for Prevention*

Tables 6 and 7 present the results for students’ views on whether or not Church leadership responds appropriately to allegations of clergy sex abuse, and whether or not leadership is taking appropriate steps to prevent future incidents, respectively. As can be seen in Table 6, nearly 60% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that Church leadership responds appropriately to allegations of clergy sex abuse. At the other end of the spectrum, slightly more than 13% agreed or strongly agreed. Thus, the clear pattern is that students do not think that Church leadership responds appropriately to allegations.

Table 6. “In general, I think the leadership of the Catholic Church (such as bishops and archbishops) responds appropriately to allegations of clergy sex abuse.”

	<i>% of Respondents (n=764)</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	21.3%
<i>Disagree</i>	37.6%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	28.0%
<i>Agree</i>	11.5%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	1.6%
	100%

Building on this, Table 7 also shows that a majority of students (52%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that appropriate steps are being taken to prevent future incidents of clergy sex abuse. Nearly one-third (30.1%) did not have an opinion on the issue, and 17.9% felt that appropriate steps are being taken to prevent future incidents.

Table 7. “In general, I think the leadership of the Catholic Church is taking appropriate steps to prevent future incidents of clergy sex abuse.”

	<i>% of Respondents (n=764)</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	16.0%
<i>Disagree</i>	36.0%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	30.1%
<i>Agree</i>	14.8%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	3.1%
	100%

The next question to consider is whether or not students’ views on the appropriateness of the Church’s response and efforts at prevention differed across religious affiliation categories. The results of this analysis are presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8. Student Views on Whether or not the Leadership of the Catholic Church Responds Appropriately to Allegations of Clergy Sex Abuse by Religious Affiliation

	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	19.0%	19.6%	32.3%	26.0%
<i>Disagree</i>	39.5%	34.8%	19.4%	39.8%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	25.2%	31.9%	29.0%	28.2%
<i>Agree</i>	15.4%	12.3%	9.7%	4.4%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	0.9%	1.5%	9.7%	1.7%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2 = 36.62$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$

As seen in Table 8, views on the appropriateness of the Church’s response did differ significantly across the different religious affiliations ( $\chi^2 = 36.62$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Students who reported no religious affiliation were the most likely to disapprove of the Church’s response, as

nearly two-thirds (65.8%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the leadership responds appropriately. Roman Catholic students were the next most likely to disapprove of the Church’s response, with 58.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that the response is appropriate, followed by Protestants at 54.4% and those with a religious affiliation of Other at 51.7%.

Table 9 reveals that students’ views on whether or not the leadership of the Church is taking appropriate steps to prevent future incidents also differed significantly by religious affiliation ( $\chi^2 = 40.94$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The clear pattern is that students who reported no religious affiliation felt most strongly that Church leadership is not doing enough to prevent future incidents, as 60.8% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that appropriate steps are being taken. This proportion is 10 percentage points higher than the next highest group, which is Roman Catholic students at 50.5%, followed by Protestants at 48.1% and students with a religious affiliation of Other at 45.2%. At the other end of the spectrum, students with a religious affiliation of Other were the most likely to agree or strongly agree that Church leadership was taking appropriate preventive steps at 35.5%, followed by Roman Catholics at 22.6%, Protestants at 15.2%, and students with no religious affiliation at 10.5%

Table 9. Student Views on Whether or not the Leadership of the Catholic Church Takes Appropriate Steps to Prevent Future Incidents by Religious Affiliation

	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	13.1%	11.8%	25.8%	24.9%
<i>Disagree</i>	37.4%	36.3%	19.4%	35.9%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	27.0%	36.8%	19.4%	28.7%
<i>Agree</i>	19.3%	12.7%	25.8%	7.7%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	3.3%	2.5%	9.7%	2.8%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2 = 40.94$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$

*Views on the Church’s Credibility on Matters of Faith and Morality*

Tables 10 and 11 present the data concerning the impact of the sex abuse issue on the Catholic Church’s credibility when speaking about matters of faith and morality. It is clear that the Church has reduced credibility in both areas in the eyes of students.

Table 10. “I believe this issue has reduced the Catholic Church’s credibility when speaking about matters of faith.”

	<i>% of Respondents (n=764)</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	5.4%
<i>Disagree</i>	11.0%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	21.9%
<i>Agree</i>	35.7%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	26.0%
	100%

As Table 10 shows, nearly 62% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the sex abuse issue has reduced the Catholic Church’s credibility when speaking about matters of faith, and only 16.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Even more damage has been done, according to students, to the credibility of the Catholic Church when speaking about morality. As reported in Table 11, 68.9% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the sex abuse issue has reduced the Church’s credibility when speaking about morality, and only 12.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Table 11. “I believe this issue has reduced the Catholic Church’s credibility when speaking about matters of morality.”

	<i>% of Respondents (n=764)</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	4.3%
<i>Disagree</i>	8.6%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	18.2%
<i>Agree</i>	37.6%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	31.3%
	100%

Tables 12 and 13 present the data on the views of the Church’s credibility on matters of faith and morality broken down by religious affiliation. As seen in Table 12, students’ opinions about the Church’s credibility when speaking about faith did differ significantly across religious affiliation ( $\chi^2 = 46.59$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$ ). 71.9% of students who reported no religious affiliation agreed or strongly agreed that the Church has reduced credibility in the area of faith as a result of the sex abuse issue, the highest proportion by about 10 percentage points. Those with a religious affiliation of Other had the next highest proportion that agreed or strongly agreed, at 61.3%, followed by Protestants at 59.8% and Roman Catholics at 59.1%. Roman Catholic students were the most likely to disagree that the Church has reduced credibility on matters of faith, with 23.4% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, followed by students who had an affiliation of Other at 22.6%, Protestants at 10.8%, and students with no religious affiliation at 8.3%.

Table 12. Student Views on Church’s Credibility on Matters of Faith by Religious Affiliation

	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	8.6%	3.4%	3.2%	1.7%
<i>Disagree</i>	14.8%	7.4%	19.4%	6.6%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	17.5%	29.4%	16.1%	19.9%
<i>Agree</i>	37.4%	35.3%	38.7%	34.3%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	21.7%	24.5%	22.6%	37.6%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2 = 46.59$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$

As seen in Table 13, students’ opinions about the Church’s credibility when speaking about morality also differed significantly across religious affiliation ( $\chi^2 = 46.65$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$ ). As was the case with credibility on matters of faith, students with no religious affiliation were the most likely

to agree that the Church’s credibility on matters of morality has been reduced as a result of the sex abuse issue, with 75.7% agreeing or strongly agreeing. They were followed by Protestants at 70.1%, Roman Catholics at 66.1%, and students with an affiliation of Other at 64.5%. Roman Catholic students were the most likely to disagree that the Church has reduced credibility on matters of morality, with 19.0% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, followed by students who had an affiliation of Other at 16.1%, Protestants at 7.4%, and students with no religious affiliation at 7.2%.

Table 13. Student Views on Church’s Credibility on Matters of Morality by Religious Affiliation

	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	7.1%	2.0%	3.2%	2.2%
<i>Disagree</i>	11.9%	5.4%	12.9%	5.0%
<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	14.8%	22.5%	19.4%	17.1%
<i>Agree</i>	42.1%	37.7%	38.7%	30.4%
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	24.0%	32.4%	25.8%	45.3%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2 = 46.65$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p < .001$

#### Section 4: Responses to Open-Ended Questions

This section will present a discussion of student responses to the open-ended questions in which they were asked to share any additional thoughts on the issue of sex abuse and the Church’s response or to elaborate on any of their answers. The two questions, the first of which was after the section of the survey focusing on knowledge and views of the issue and the second of which was at the end of the survey, generated a total of 143 responses. A thematic analysis was conducted whereby all of the responses were read and coded for recurring patterns or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Five themes emerged from the analysis, which are discussed below along with some sample quotes highlighting each theme.

The first theme was a sense of *anger and frustration* among the students. There was anger over the occurrence of clergy sex abuse itself, as well as anger and frustration at Church leadership’s response to allegations of abuse. Common words and phrases that appeared in multiple responses included “sad,” “cruel,” “shameful,” “sickening,” “moral failure,” and “swept under the rug.” Some responses in particular that exemplify this theme are:

“As a person who was born and raised in the Catholic faith, it sickens me to see all of this coming to light.”

“It is shameful and everyone involved should be ashamed of themselves.”

“The Church has for decades placed protection of the institution and its power above the protection of children, innocent priests, and its congregants. It is a total moral failure as an institution.”

“It is baffling to me that churches would sweep the issue under the rug and transfer priests instead of punish them.”

“It’s a hard pill to swallow when you are taking recommendations and scripture from an organization that helped cover up some pretty heinous crimes against the most impressionable people under their care.”

“It’s not enough to apologize and say it’s wrong...actions speak much louder than words.”

A second theme to emerge from the answers was that this issue is having a direct *effect on students’ personal religious faith and practice*. In multiple responses students indicated that the sex abuse crisis is the reason they no longer attend church, is they reason they left the Catholic faith altogether, or is the reason they will not join the Catholic Church. Some examples of responses that highlight this theme are:

“In my honest opinion the issues of sex abuse in the Catholic Church have led me to stray further and further from Catholicism.”

“My desire to go to church has been impacted by this issue.”

“I grew up extremely Catholic and after these stories grew I stopped attending Mass. I cannot and will not trust a religious organization whom allows this to happen.”

“The scandal has driven me further from the Catholic Church not because of what happened, but because of the way in which the Catholic Church deals with its issues: it doesn’t.”

“This specific issue has been a major factor in the reason why I am so on the fence about officially becoming Catholic instead of just a non-denominational Christian.”

A third theme present in the responses was one of a *personal connection* to the issue. Multiple responses indicated that either a family member of the student had been victimized, they knew an accused priest, or that there had been allegations of abuse at their parish. Some specific responses in line with this theme are:

“I witnessed this issue in my own parish before I became atheist and part of my reason for changing my beliefs was due to how they handled it.”

“I have two family members that were sexually abused by a priest when they were children.”

“My uncle could be alive today if the sexual abuse didn’t traumatize him, all that my family got out of it was a money settlement to keep quiet.”

“A former priest at a Roman Catholic church I used to go to was convicted of child molestation.”

“My mother’s brothers were sexually abused by their priest when they were kids.”

A fourth theme present in many of the responses was the *need for reform in the Church*. Common ideas mentioned were a call for more transparency in the Church’s response to abuse allegations, more involvement of lay people in oversight and in the actual response to abuse allegations, allowing priests to marry, and an improved screening process for future priests. Specific responses indicative of this theme include:

“I think the church needs to do a better job of being transparent and stop denying legal authorities the right to look at records.”

“The responsibility for investigating and holding abusers accountable shouldn’t be left with Catholic leaders. The entire matter should be handed over to real law enforcement agencies, and the Catholic Church shouldn’t be able to keep abusers’ names secret, especially if they are still in the community.”

“I do believe that lay people should have more active roles in the Church and their response to this situation.”

“I think the Catholic Church should re-evaluate its standards for their clergy and allow them to marry.”

The final theme to emerge from the responses was that the sex abuse crisis *does not represent true Catholics or true Catholicism*. The main sentiments expressed in line with this theme were that the horrible actions by some do not represent everyone in the Church, and that the credibility of the entire religion and its teachings should not hinge on the action (or lack of action, in regards to leadership) of some. Representative quotes for this theme include:

“The Church is an institution and an institution is imperfect. Just because men are falling into sin does not mean that the religion itself should have any less credibility.”

“I’m coming from the view that the offenders are individuals, not representing Catholicism and what it teaches. Just like any organization, there will be those within it that act contrary to the ideas of the organization.”

“The people responsible for the act should be addressed appropriately without marring the entire organization.”

“I don’t think the Church as a whole should be blamed for the evils of individuals.”

### **Section 5: Discussion and Conclusions**

A survey focusing on knowledge and views of the issue of clergy sex abuse and the Catholic Church’s response, and also containing questions on personal religious affiliation, practice, salience, and basic demographics, was administered via email to all Niagara University undergraduate and graduate students in February and March of 2019 (n = 764). The analyses presented here focused on the items relating to knowledge and views of clergy sex abuse and the Church’s response, and hopefully can begin to lay a foundation to understand the impact the crisis is having on young adults both inside and outside the Church.

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of students indicated a moderate or higher level of knowledge of the issue by choosing a score of 3 or higher out of 5 when asked to rate the extent of their knowledge, with Roman Catholic students reporting the highest level of knowledge followed by students without any religious affiliation. Students also reported drawing on a variety of sources for their information. National and local media lead the way with each serving as a source for nearly 75% of students, and social media was also frequently used with 63.2% of students citing it as a source.

It is clear from the data that the issue of clergy sex abuse and the Church’s response is important to students. Nearly 45% indicated it was very important to them personally, and more than 88% indicated it was either somewhat or very important. Importance did differ significantly by religious affiliation, with Roman Catholic students the most likely to report it was very important (53.1%), followed closely by those with a religious affiliation of Other (51.6%). Also, although students with no religious affiliation were the most likely to report the issue was not at all important to them (9.4%), nearly 35% of this group considered the issue to be very important. Thus, young adults both inside and outside the Church are attaching personal importance to this issue.

Not only is the issue important to students, but there is a strong sentiment of disapproval of Church leadership’s response to allegations of clergy sex abuse, dissatisfaction with the Church’s efforts at prevention of future incidents, and a loss of credibility on matters of faith and morality in the eyes of students. Specifically, 58.9% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that Church leadership responds appropriately to allegations of abuse, and 52% disagreed or strongly disagreed that leadership is taking appropriate steps to prevent future incidents. Likely stemming from this disapproval is a perceived reduction in the Church’s credibility on matters of faith and morality. 61.7% of students agreed or strongly agreed that this issue has reduced the Church’s credibility on matters of faith, and 68.9% agreed or strongly agreed that it has reduced the Church’s credibility on matters of morality.

The disapproval, dissatisfaction, and perceived reduction in credibility did differ significantly by religious affiliation. Although a majority of Roman Catholic students disapproved of the Church’s response to allegations of abuse, did not think appropriate steps were being taken towards

prevention, and agreed that the Church has reduced credibility on matters of both faith and morality as a result of this issue, the students who felt most strongly on each of these items were not the Roman Catholics but instead were those with no religious affiliation. Thus, the strongest sentiment of disapproval and perceived loss of credibility came from those who identify as being outside the Church.

Although of course the most serious harm is done to the victims of clergy sex abuse and their families, these findings suggest that this crisis is also damaging the Church's witness to and evangelization of the larger culture. Those outside the Church are less likely to look to the Church for spiritual or moral guidance, and some of these individuals even indicated that they left because of the issue. For example, as one respondent stated, "The scandal has driven me further from the Catholic Church not because of what happened, but because of the way in which the Catholic Church deals with its issues: it doesn't." Similarly, another student noted, "A lot of people within Catholicism wonder why more and more people do not support the Catholic Church, and this is one of the biggest reasons why." Further, others are now less likely to enter the Church, as indicated by one individual who noted, "This specific issue has been a major factor in the reason why I am so on the fence about officially becoming Catholic instead of just a non-denominational Christian." Research has already demonstrated that young adults are less religious compared to ten years ago due to a variety of reasons (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2015), and this crisis may serve to only exacerbate that trend.

In addition, the serious disapproval and loss of credibility on matters of faith and morality reported by Roman Catholic students is eye-opening. Above and beyond the harm to the actual victims and their families, these results suggest that much damage is being done to a crucial piece of the Church's future – emerging adults who are already in the Church. As Smith et al. (2014) report in their study of Catholic teens and emerging adults, the most common pathway for Catholic youth is one of decline in religious faith and practice as they enter emerging adulthood, and failure to develop a strong relationship with their faith or the Church during this time period increases the likelihood of this decline. Based on the findings reported in the current study, the clergy sex abuse crisis seems to be weakening Catholic students' bonds with the Church and thus could be contributing to a decline in religious faith and practice.

### *Limitations*

It is important to note a few limitations to the current study which should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. First, the sample is not a random sample of Niagara University students, and is not necessarily representative of the overall student body. Although the survey was sent to the entire population of undergraduate and graduate students, those who chose to respond are likely not representative of students overall. Especially since the topic of the survey was the sex abuse crisis and the Catholic Church's response, students who had more knowledge or stronger feelings about the issue were probably more likely to respond, leading to the possibility of selection bias in the sample. Regardless, this sample of 764 respondents is still a sizeable proportion of Niagara students and does include a good cross-section of religious affiliations, gender, race/ethnicity, and class standing.

One other limitation is that although the survey questions in the current study covered key views on the issue of clergy sex abuse and the Church's response, as well as the perceived credibility of the Church on matters of faith and morality, they do not provide an exhaustive picture. The number of questions was limited in an attempt to keep the survey manageable for respondents and to increase the participation and completion rates, with the trade-off being some information was not collected. Future research could focus on additional questions and include a more in-depth qualitative component to provide a more comprehensive assessment of student views on this issue.

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18. Has it changed at all as a result of the sex abuse issue?  
a. No                      b. Yes – decreased                      c. Yes – increased
19. Other than during religious services, how often do you pray?  
a. Never  
b. Once a month or less  
c. 2-3 times a month  
d. About once a week  
e. A few times a week  
f. Once a day or more
20. Has your frequency of prayer changed at all since coming to college?  
a. No                      b. Yes – decreased                      c. Yes – increased
21. Has it changed at all as a result of the sex abuse issue?  
a. No                      b. Yes – decreased                      c. Yes – increased
22. Other than during religious services, how often do you read the scriptures of your religious tradition?  
a. Never  
b. Once a month or less  
c. 2-3 times a month  
d. About once a week  
e. A few times a week  
f. Once a day or more
23. Has your frequency of scripture reading changed at all since coming to college?  
a. No                      b. Yes – decreased                      c. Yes – increased
24. Has it changed at all as a result of the sex abuse issue?  
a. No                      b. Yes – decreased                      c. Yes – increased
25. How important is religious faith or spirituality for how you live your life and make decisions?  
a. Not at all important  
b. Somewhat important  
c. Very important  
d. Extremely important
26. Has the importance of religious faith or spirituality changed at all since coming to college?  
a. No                      b. Yes – decreased                      c. Yes – increased

27. Has it changed at all as a result of the sex abuse issue?  
a. No                      b. Yes – decreased                      c. Yes – increased
28. How many of your closest friends would you describe as “religious” or “spiritual”?  
a. None of them  
b. Some of them  
c. Most of them  
d. All of them

**Section III. Demographics**

This final section contains questions concerning basic demographic and descriptive information.

29. Sex  
a. Male                      b. Female
30. With which Race/Ethnicity do you identify?  
a. White  
b. African-American  
c. Hispanic  
d. Asian  
e. Native American/Pacific Islander  
f. Other
31. Age \_\_\_\_\_
32. Class Standing  
a. Freshman  
b. Sophomore  
c. Junior  
d. Senior  
e. Graduate student
33. In which college or program are you enrolled? (check all that apply)  
a. College of Arts and Sciences  
b. College of Business Administration  
c. College of Education  
d. College of Hospitality and Tourism Management  
e. Academic Exploration Program
34. If you have any additional thoughts or comments about any of the issues covered in this survey please write them in the space below.

**Thank you for your participation!**

*If you would like to be entered into a drawing to receive one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards, please include your email address below. Your email address will not be linked with your responses to the survey questions.*

email \_\_\_\_\_