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What the Signal Reached

What the Catholic Church Knows About Pathways That Decide

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In the summer of 1969, Barbara Blaine was thirteen years old and a member of the Deaconettes, a group of junior-high girls at St. Pius X parish in Toledo, Ohio, who cleaned up after Mass. Father Chet Warren had invited them to dinner as a reward. After the meal, Blaine found herself alone with him.

The abuse continued until her senior year of high school. She told no one. Warren had told her to go to confession immediately and say nothing to anyone else, because no one would understand, and no one would believe her.

In 1985, she read a newspaper article about a priest sexually abusing altar boys. She went to her family. Her family went to the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, Warren's religious order, and to the bishop of Toledo. The pathway existed. They entered it.

Her mother described the meeting with the Oblates years later. They were not hostile. They listened. Then they said they would be in touch. Weeks passed. Months passed. Nothing came back.

The meeting with the bishop produced the same result.

The family was told Barbara had likely misinterpreted Warren's affection. They were told to keep the matter away from law enforcement. Warren remained in ministry.

He continued preaching until September 1992. The Diocese of Toledo would later identify him as a serial offender. At the time the Blaine family brought their report, the order and the diocese already knew he had other victims.

The pathway received the signal. It responded with process. It produced acknowledgment, meetings, follow-up promises, and a determination. The determination was that nothing required action. Warren stayed.

Three cases now. Three structural conditions.

Ewbank submitted to a channel that received his complaint, confirmed it, generated documentation, and stopped. The channel processed. The connection to authority was absent.

Blaine's family submitted to a pathway that received their report, engaged with it, produced a response, and routed it to suppression. The pathway was active and functional. It converted their signal into a specific output: continuation.

The pathway was present and functional. What the pathway lacked was any mechanism capable of classifying what it had received as a systemic problem

The Oblates and the diocese were structured to handle individual cases. Each report that entered the system was processed as a discrete event. A priest had been accused. The matter had been reviewed. The conclusion was that ministry could continue. The pathway produced this output reliably, for decades, across multiple dioceses, for multiple priests, for thousands of reports.

The reports were entering a system that could only see them one at a time.

On January 6, 2002, the Boston Globe published the first story in what would become the Spotlight series. The investigation documented not individual cases but the institutional pattern: priests moved between parishes as accusations accumulated, each transfer handled internally, each report processed in isolation, the aggregate never examined.

What the Globe published did not originate new information. The documents existed. The victims had reported. The diocesan records contained the pattern. What changed was that a mechanism outside the Church's internal architecture became capable of receiving the signal in a form the internal system had never produced: as a pattern, across cases, across decades, across geography.

The pathway that had been receiving reports since 1969 had not been designed to produce that classification. It was designed to handle each report as a closed matter. It handled them that way until a different mechanism, external, with different properties, received the accumulated record and produced something the internal pathway could not.

Blaine did not do anything wrong in 1985. Her family brought a clear report to the correct authority through the correct process. The pathway received it and acted on it in the only way it was built to act. Additional reports entered the same pathway and produced the same result. The mechanism required to classify the signal as systemic did not exist inside the system receiving it.

The threshold had no relation to quantity. It was a structural condition: the mechanism capable of seeing what the pathway had been accumulating for thirty years.

That condition existed outside the system. The people sending the signal could not produce it. From the position of anyone submitting a report, it had no presence at all. The pathway was real. The signal reached it. The activation yet been met.

This essay is part of the Realis Signal and Consequence Series. It applies concepts from Structural Orientation Theory, a framework developed at Realis Institute for understanding how agents and institutions behave when sustained pressure makes judgment, verification, and authority load-bearing. For more, visit realisinstitute.com.