The topic I selected was clergy abuse. I selected this topic because it is very emotional to most people and sociological analysis requires one to remove emotion and be objective in our analysis. Thus, this is the perfect social phenomenon to examine sociologically. I will be using examples from the documentary *Deliver Us from Evil*. This film is a raw depiction of Oliver O’Grady, a once prominent and trusted Catholic priest in California who sexually abused hundreds of children. His crimes and the impact of the church corruption are examined by the three major theories of sociology.

According to functionalism, there are five major institutions that are impacted by social phenomenon as well as latent functions and dysfunctions. Although it is difficult to image a social benefit arising from child sexual predation, understanding how all behaviors contribute to social stability is an integral component of structural functionalism. One latent function (which impacts the institution of the family) is the awareness that comes with the discovery of crimes like the sexual crimes of O’Grady. In the film, two of his victims (females raped by O’Grady under his care) are in their adulthood and are actively seeking justice for themselves, for other victims, and to prevent future victims. These two women speak out against O’Grady and the church authorities who helped to cover up his crimes by moving him to different parishes. Their actions (going on the news, being in this documentary) bring attention and awareness to this social problem. This awareness may empower parents and communities to learn how to protect their children and prevent further abuse. Another latent function (which impacts the economy) are the jobs that are created to investigate the crimes, prosecute the offenders, pass laws (impact on government), rehabilitate the convicts, and even the social workers that advocate for the victims have jobs because clergy abuse exists. These latent functions are positive social consequences of sex crimes perpetrated by some clergymen.

Latent dysfunctions include trauma to the victims. These victims will grow up fearful of people in the church and it may affect their religious beliefs (impact on religious institution). Weak religious ties may result in weak social integration which may impact happiness of the individual according to Durkheim. Another dysfunction may be the interruption in the child’s education. In the film, many of the child victims were abused at school which impeded their academic performances. Therefore, the educational institution is affected because Catholic schools may not be able to serve its’ purpose. Another impact may be due to a withdrawal of students and funding. In the film, families of clergy abuse victims sued the church and school for tuition and emotional damages. Families felt that their money spent for tuition should be returned since their children were not protected, instead they were victimized.

A second theory that can help us understand this social problem is symbolic interactionism. There are many important applications of this theory, but only a few examples will be discussed. One example centers on the symbol of a priest. Priests are symbolic of purity, spiritual leadership, and abstinence. One set of parents in the film, stated that O’Grady would spend the night at their house often. They did not suspect him to be a sexual predator because he would always be seen reading the Bible and praying. According to this theory, we react to symbols based on their meaning. In this case, the parents reacted with blind trust because reading the Bible and praying meant that someone was most likely obedient to God and Christian principles and therefore could be trusted to be around children. The parents in the film taught their children to trust Father
O’Grady (emergence of symbols through interaction, the second core assumption of this theory). These children learned from their parents that priests are “safe” and they serve as authority figures. Perhaps if the children were taught that no one, even those we trust like priests, can touch kids “in their bathing suit parts”, these children could have learned a different set of ideas about protecting themselves. In any case, learning definitions of symbols is the main point of this core assumption and one could claim that parents taught their children a dangerous definition of a priest (someone to trust always). Lastly, the third core assumption of this theory is that symbols and meanings continue to emerge and change. In the film, one can see that the meaning of church, of God, of clergymen had changed for many of the victims and their families. One father of a victim said that they victimization of his daughter by O’Grady has caused him to redefine his beliefs. After the abuse, this father no longer believed in God. Before, the church was a symbol of hope, faith, and trust. He now defines the church as a symbol of corruption and sin. Perhaps, the symbolism of a church has changed for many believers as well.

The third theory is conflict theory. According to this theory there are struggles between social groups over inequality. This struggle is positive and necessary for social change to emerge. With regard to clergy abuse, the groups competing are the Catholic Church (the haves) and the victims (the have nots). Conflict theorists state that the competition is almost always over power. In this case, the dominant group is the Catholic Church who wants to maintain the power to influence the political landscape and to control how they are perceived by the public. The victims threaten the power held by the Church with high profile investigations which cause the Church to lose political influence and public trust. Public trust is important because if this decreases, then the donations given to the Church may also severely decrease and further hinder their power and influence. This struggle over justice and power is positive for social change because it may ultimately result in safe churches for all denominations, harsher punishments for sex offenders, more victim advocates, thus a more equal distribution of power and resources.

The crimes of Oliver O’Grady are too awful for words. The stories of the victims are heartbreaking and ongoing as they try to heal from the horrors inflicted on them. It is difficult not to become emotional when one learns about clergy abuse, but through theoretical analysis, one can objectively examine what has been regarded as the largest scandal of human history.