

# A Long Way to Go

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Eamonn Conway

## INTRODUCTION

The last few weeks have been dark and difficult in the Irish Church. I have heard people, especially priests, say that it has been the most difficult time for them since we started to have to deal with child sexual abuse. What is perhaps new is a realization that the child sexual abuse 'crisis' is not now going to go away any time soon. No turning point is in sight. Most bishops and many priests will probably never experience a time in their ministry when this issue will not be the most prominent and pressing with which they have to deal.

There is a sinking feeling that there will continue for some time to be more reports, more enquiries, more sudden and sickening news of priests being asked to 'step aside' or 'step down' while an alleged crime is being investigated, and that this could last for years. It has become clear now in a more profound way that just as the horrific damage caused by acts of abuse has affected not only victims themselves but all those close to them, so also the mishandling of these cases by those in authority has had far-reaching negative implications for the mission of the Church. Simply put, the Church, understood as institution, is no longer deemed credible or trustworthy, and at the moment the damage seems irreversible.

While responding to the pain of victims and their families must always be considered primary, the focus of this paper is on helping priests not just to cope but also make sense of this present crisis in a way that can be life-giving for them personally and for the renewal of the Church.

We begin by reflecting on the 'deep shadow' that covers the land (Is 9:2). The disappointment, hurt and bewilderment felt by many of us are quite acute, and we are probably not the best equipped for acknowledging or expressing this, something that is itself part of the problem. So here goes.

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### A TIME FOR GRIEVING

For everything there is a season, according to Ecclesiastes 3. In particular, it mentions a time for weeping. This is a time for weeping, for mourning. It is a time for expressing profound grief. While inevitably as we get older there is always some loss of idealism, there is a sense at the moment of idealism, energy and enthusiasm being stripped away from us. Of course, many people and parishioners genuinely express faith in us and offer encouragement at this time. Nonetheless, the wider public reaction, especially in the media, is having a debilitating and devastating effect.

We have to deal with criticism of the Church that we know to be merited and fair. The pain experienced by victims at the hands of abusers was multiplied beyond calculation by the way their cases were sometimes mishandled by those in authority. At the heart of this abusive behaviour is how decisions were, and to some extent still are, made in the Church; the fact that participative and accountable decision-making has not generally been a reality at any level, whether from parish council to Roman synod. Yet in the face of this we feel mostly powerless and unable to effect change. There are other examples of recent criticism that we have to try to acknowledge as fair. For example, many priests have been saying for years that the role of the Church in managing schools needs to be reviewed, and feel it is a pity that this issue will now be addressed against the backdrop of a sense that the Church is not to be trusted.

At the same time, much of the criticism of clergy reported in the media has been unfair and unwarranted. Individual bishops have been unfairly targeted and misrepresented by the Press. Distortions have been allowed to take root in public perception, e.g. the percentage of clergy involved in the abuse of minors, celibacy as a causative factor, an apparent clash between civil and canon law etc. Yet there does not seem to be anyone or any body who can 'plead our cause' effectively in the media. As Pádraig Daly says in one of his poems,

We have some urgent tale to tell  
About life; but our mouths open  
And no sound gathers shape.

We belong out by the side of things.

There is a sense of being unfairly side-lined and silenced at the moment.

At another level we also have to deal with the fact that many of our colleagues have been placed on administrative leave, a process itself shrouded in ambiguity and secrecy (can one refuse to 'step aside'?). Suddenly, a man is out of his job and home and only a select few know of his whereabouts. Little can be said for legal

reasons. The list of those in 'limbo land' seems to grow longer. How are we to relate to these brother priests? Are we to show them support, and if so, how? Is that fair to alleged victims? What if they have committed horrific crimes in the past? At some level do we not feel betrayed by them as well? How do we exercise compassion in a way that is not misplaced or misunderstood? We also fear for ourselves. If someone makes an unfounded allegation who can we rely upon to defend us?

The institutional Church is currently being corralled into dealing with (alleged) perpetrators in exactly the same way as any secular institution might. At one level, this is correct and should have happened years ago: where the protection of children and vulnerable adults is concerned, the same if not higher standards must apply. At the same time, there is something about the action of Christ we are required to emulate which means breaking through the reciprocal cycle of crime and punishment, of victim and victimizer. At the heart of the Christian story is love, a love that can be challenging and searing in the face of wrongdoing, but is nonetheless healing and forgiving. It seems hard to name this and even harder to realize it in our actions as Church at the moment.

Most of us entered priesthood with the right intention and motivation. Over the years perhaps we have realized that there are other ways we could have led our lives, in which we could have been equally fulfilled and have as equally done good, but we have stuck with priesthood in dogged fidelity as best we could. We never claimed to be perfect people, yet we nonetheless benefited at times from the exalted view of us held by many in society. This exalted view has been replaced by a cloud of suspicion which now hangs over all of us and which very often we have to deal with in isolating loneliness.

For these and other reasons, it is a time for weeping, for acknowledging our sense of sorrow, loss, anger and confusion; our profound sense of desert and desertion. In the context of helping people to deal with the abuse crisis and its effects in the Australian context, Gerald Arbuckle has pointed out that repressed grief suffocates and that a culture of denial inevitably leads to further loss and decay.<sup>1</sup> He says that the truly hopeful find in themselves the courage to name their sense of pain and chaos. It is by naming that we can begin to let go. By letting go we open up the possibility of growth and new life that remain barely imaginable as long as we are clinging to our sense of grief, pain and hurt.

1. Gerald Arbuckle, 'The Call to Today's Church to Grieve in Hope', *The Australian Catholic Record*, October 1996, pp 387-393.

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There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love (1 John 4:18).

Fear can drive out trust, confidence and love. Acknowledging our fears, facing up to our failures, is difficult, and layers of denial and self-deception can run deep. In particular, Arbuckle warns against retreating into the false hope of restorationism. The attempt to restore the Church to a comfortingly familiar pre-conciliar time of apparent clarity, order and discipline is well-meaning, but futile and self-defeating. The seeds of the harvest of abusive behaviour we are now reaping were sown in a Church that professed to be more than clear about sin and evil and condemned readily the moral aberrations at least of its lay members. Those of its clergy were buried deep in a hiddenness with which we are now trying to come to terms.

There is no going back. There never was or will be a time of perfection for the Church in history. Change is not an option; the only hope lies in choosing change wisely. Authentic hope, according to Arbuckle, is found in facing up to the darkness and in admitting to our inner powerlessness. In *East Coker*, Eliot writes,

... be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,  
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed  
With a hollow rumble of wings ...

If fear can drive out love, then love can also vanquish fear. Healing will come not from reacting but rather from allowing the darkness of these days to come upon us, trusting that God is in this mess, that God can bring forth new life from apparently hopeless and even profoundly Godforsaken and evil situations.

There is, of course, a danger that we would slip into a facile and self-deceiving martyrdom complex, seeing ourselves as innocent victims and claiming some high moral ground by offering to unite our sufferings with those of the abuse victims. There is a genuine sense in which suffering can be redemptive. But we have to be careful not to fall into the trap of a superficial 'spiritualization' of the pain we are experiencing. We must really permit ourselves to experience whatever pain we are in. To block it out would be to also block out the way that the Spirit can speak to us in our pain and powerlessness.

### A TIME FOR BECOMING HUMAN

The tendency has been to try to 'ring-fence' the problem of child sexual abuse in the Church by portraying it as merely the personal criminal behaviour of a few. 'Unfortunately, some men with sexually abusive tendencies got ordained. We have got out of ministry

as many of these as we can; we will do everything possible to prevent others with these kinds of tendencies from getting into ministry in the first place.<sup>1</sup> Those who have suggested otherwise have been accused of attempting to hijack the crisis to advance a liberal agenda. I suspect that among other things, behind this superficial analysis lurks an overly simplistic, disintegrated, static and inadequate notion of sexuality. The effect of it, however, is that it could prevent us from asking hard questions.

Questions need to be asked at a structural level, and Bishop Willie Walsh has been one of the few Church leaders courageous enough to do this in recent times.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the roots of the problems we are facing stretch right into the nature of how ministry is currently structured (it also has roots in issues relating to operative images of God, understandings of revelation etc. which we cannot go into here).<sup>3</sup> We have to ask why abuse scandals have emerged all around the Western world, from Poznan to Boston, Ferns to Philadelphia, and we have not yet even begun to hear from the developing world. We have to ask whether the fact that celibacy is mandatory makes priesthood attractive to people who fear intimacy and who wish to avoid facing up to issues relating to psychosexual maturity.

There is also considerable clinical evidence that unlike sexual offenders generally in society, the vast majority of clergy who have abused minors have as their sexual preference post-pubertal boys.<sup>4</sup> This raises an issue that must be addressed, but that must also be handled with great sensitivity, namely, the question of the relationship between sexual abuse and sexual orientation. It is to be hoped that such sensitivity accompanies discussion of the Congregation for Education's document on homosexuality and candidacy for priesthood. The focus must be upon helping all priests, present and future, to develop adult, peer-oriented celibate integration of their sexuality.

It has also been noted that clergy presenting for therapy often 'come off the page' in terms of issues relating to authority, power and dealing with unresolved conflict. We find ourselves facing into a new Church in which we quite simply have to learn how to make decisions in a participative and consultative way, and be accountable for these decisions not just vertically, to the bishop/pope, but horizontally, that is, to the communities which we serve. This is new and difficult. And it is no use arguing that the Church

2. *The Irish Independent*, 12 November 2005.

3. See Eamonn Conway, 'Operative Theologies of Priesthood: Have They Contributed to Child Sexual Abuse?', *Concilium* 2004/3, London: SCM, pp. 72-86.

4. See in particular 'A Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States', United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Review Board for the Protection of Children (2004).

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is not a democracy. It is not an oligarchy or a feudal monarchy either. The structures now in decay belonged more to empire than to reign of God. There are sound and irrefutable theological reasons for moving to a more participative and shared leadership model of Church even if the declining numbers of clergy as well as societal change did not make any other form of leadership/authority effectively unworkable.

If we have not yet made the connections between child sexual abuse and its mishandling, and the reluctance, for example, to establish parish councils, finance councils, open up discussion on mandatory celibacy and new models of ordained ministry, then we are still in serious denial. If that is the case we are still in the process of making victims, and it is time to stop.

Courage is needed to face questions at a structural and institutional level. But these questions must also be faced at a personal level as well. Regardless of our age or stage in life, if we occupy a position of leadership at any level in the Church it is not acceptable simply to say that what is there will 'see me out'. That would be irresponsible. At a personal level, we also need to face questions relating to our own personal maturity in terms of our sexuality, how we exercise authority and decision-making, and so on. We need to ensure that we have the nourishment we need at every level to grow in our humanity. At another level, we need to take contemporary theological scholarship seriously. We cannot face the problems with which we have to deal both within the Church and in a rapidly changing society without serious thought and reflection. These are not optional extras and our continuing education cannot continue to be something undertaken at personal whim. Huge money is understandably being paid to put child protection services in place. I would ask that similar resources be invested in the continuing education of clergy and others employed by the Church so that they can attend to their own ongoing formation in terms of theology, spirituality and human development. Money can be found if it has to be, as it has been found for child protection.

An audit of the resources in place for the continuing education and support of those now working in the Church is more important than many of the other audits being proposed at the moment. But at the end of the day, each of us remains fundamentally responsible for our own on-going formation. No process or programme can make us undertake the risky and sometimes scary journey into the fullness of our own humanity.

### A TIME FOR COURAGE

Courage is needed, institutionally and individually, so I want to delay for a moment to explore what exactly courage is. Courage,

fundamentally, is a virtue. This means it is the flourishing of a particular human energy or power. It is something that is called forth from us at a time of perceived threat. According to William Desmond,<sup>5</sup> it is a form of self-affirmation, self-confidence in the face of danger. It is a confidence to face that which we perceive as threatening us.

It is important to differentiate courage from mere bravado, either from facing into danger 'half-cocked', or from stoically 'keeping the chin up' or maintaining a 'stiff upper lip' and simply waiting passively for the perceived threat or danger to pass. Courage is a *knowing* self-affirmation. It can only emerge when we recognize the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves, and, as in the earlier citation from Eliot, allow the darkness of this reality to come upon us. Courage is also a *willing* self-affirmation. To be courageous involves a decision of the will. Courage involves consciously facing the danger or threat and deciding not to be overwhelmed by it. Courage involves *self-affirmation* in that it is a decision involving the whole person, an existential stance, a decision to be totally present-to, to 'stand before' the threat or danger. Finally, such self-affirmation does not come from the self. It is something that is received, drawn forth from us in the face of threat. Courage is what we become through God's gift when faced with danger and threat.

Such courage is needed by us at this moment. We need the courage to stand before the shameful fact that hands that stretched over bread and wine also molested children, grievously wounding their bodies, and Christ's. We need courage to face up to the fact that those in leadership made serious errors of judgment. They failed, at times dismally, to find the courage to confront abusers, and sometimes, thinking that they were protecting the Church, placed other children in danger. We need courage to name the ways in which we still find ourselves participating in Church structures we know to be unjust and damaging to the Church's mission, and we need courage and wisdom to discern changes that can and must be made. We need courage to respond in a distinctively Christian way to incidents of abuse, showing care and compassion for the offender as well as for the victim, even if this is unpopular with sections of society and/or Church membership. We need courage to face up to our own failings, our own inhumanity. We need courage to re-engage in the Church's mission, and to ensure that the values of the reign of God are not lost to our society because of the failings of the Church and its ministers.

5. See William Desmond, 'The Secret Sources of Strengthening: On Courage', *Is there a Sabbath for Thought? Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham, 2005), pp 238-262.

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### A TIME FOR HOPE

We are becoming aware that it is difficult for faith to flourish in a prosperous society. Similarly, it is difficult for faith and hope to flourish in a time of calm, security and certainty within the Church. Too much certainty blocks the pathway to truth, which is not the same as certainty. If we reflect on John's portrayal of the resurrection, we realize that it was still dark when Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb (Jn 2:1), and there was little about which she could have felt certain or secure. Her loved one was dead, and his death signalled the collapse of all that had become familiar, the scattering of his followers, leaving only terror and fear. James Alison notes that, 'Whatever Christian hope is, it begins in terror and utter disorientation in the face of the collapse of all that is familiar and well known.'<sup>6</sup> Like courage, hope is this resilient confidence in the abiding love of God that is drawn out of us in situations that appear to be hopeless. We *become* hope, but only when we cast aside the false bases upon which we sometimes build our confidence.

Nothing of what is essential to the Church in the fulfilment of its mission can or will be lost at this time. This is what it means to believe that Christ remains with his Church. Arguably, much of what the Church is losing at the moment, in terms of its public profile, prestige, standing and place in society, is inessential to its task of witnessing to the reign of God, and has, in fact, got in the way. We must trust that the Spirit is calling the Church to a new and as yet unimagined reality, one which all our attempts at pastoral renewal and all our well-meaning but somewhat half-hearted efforts at reform have not yet managed to bring to birth. Returning again to Ecclesiastes, there is a time, a painful time but still God's own time, 'a time to rend', 'to pluck up what is planted', 'to cast away stones', no matter how precious these might seem to us.

This would seem to be a time for us to be held accountable for our actions and our inaction. It is a time to endure investigation, suspicion, even unfair criticism as well as necessary correction and admonition by the public, media and government. It is a time for careful response rather than kneejerk reaction, God's fidelity to us giving us the courage to decipher and discern where we must yield, where we must learn and change, where we must challenge.

### CONCLUSION

The darkness that entered into the lives of victims over decades has, for years, cast a dark shadow over them and their families. That, and the mishandling of cases when they came to light, has cast a dark shadow over the whole Church. As we gather to cele-

6. James Alison, *Living in the End Times* (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 161.

brate Christmas this year there should be awkwardness around the Christian family table, a sense of discomfort at the hurt and the wounds that have been caused and have not yet been healed. While in this paper I have focused on the sense of hurt experienced by clergy, a sense of being let down and betrayed is also felt by many laity, especially those who have continued to practise despite peer pressure to do otherwise, and by parents who have experienced great difficulty in getting their children to go to Mass.

As with any family gathering, the temptation will be not to let the awkwardnesses come to the table; instead, to allow ourselves to be carried along by the flashing lights and the air of festivity. But that would be to celebrate Christmas as a merely secular holiday. On Christmas night we will read that 'the people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who lived in a land of deep shadow a light has shone' (Is 9:12).

It is precisely the messiness of an unfaithful, deceitful, fragile and fearful human condition that God took the radical risk of assuming. Ferns is not far from Bethlehem, or Bethlehem from Golgotha and the empty tomb. 'Priests have a long way to go,' said R. S. Thomas, 'The people wait for them to come/ To them over the broken glass/ Of their vows'. It is time for us to be on our way.

**The winter touch of God.** The feast of Christmas celebrates the touch of God, his humanity, his presence in the world, his grace. Faith is difficult, like the winter darkness. We search for signs, for growth before the day closes and the darkness sets in. Sometimes when our prayer is barren we want to touch something, to be touched by something, to bring colour to that which we cannot see. I've often wondered why so many people who don't go to Mass on a regular basis, or at all, come to Mass on Christmas Day. I used to think that some sense of tradition brought them. But I've come to believe that for many people at Christmas the presence of God in family, in kindness and in reconciliation, is tangible. I believe that at Christmas, some people discover grace, a grace that has always been there, a grace brought to life by the winter touch of God.

—GARY WADE, *A Fragile Kingdom* (Dublin: Veritas) p. 91