

The good, the bad and the ugly: Media coverage of scandals in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

In the course of the last decade, change has become turmoil in Catholic Church in Ireland, starting with the revelations regarding Eamonn Casey, who was discovered to have fathered a child while Bishop of Kerry, through the scandals of child sexual abuse by priests and brothers to the present day investigation into religious-run schools. The Irish media have covered all of these events in great detail. This article attempts to examine two dimensions of media coverage of scandals - the beneficial effect of such revelations and the damaging effect of sensational or exaggerated coverage.

The Irish people are well served, in the main, by the high quality of journalism found in radio, television, and the broadsheet newspapers. These media are seen as reliable and trustworthy; their coverage of events is a measure of the significance and relative importance of those events to Irish society. The public, rightly, has an expectation that the media will report fairly and accurately on what is occurring that affects society. Consumers use media content to exercise a surveillance function on society, relying on the media to inform them about those issues of import, of which the public might otherwise remain ignorant. Such surveillance, however, comes at a price. As Cohen puts it 'the press...may not be successful in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about.'ⁱ

Iyengar and Kinder's work on agenda setting in television news indicates that news coverage affects the public's approach to major issues. Their studies show that the people most prone to agenda setting effects are those who are neither politically active nor strongly affiliated with a political party.ⁱⁱ Significant non-political news items, then, are relatively easily placed in the public consciousness. The clear consequence of agenda setting theory is that the framers of the news wield a vast amount of influence over how the public views various events and personalities.

As well as setting the agenda for public issues, the news media can also set the agenda for themselves by their repetitious coverage of a single event and their definitions of newsworthiness. People, including journalists, cannot pay attention to everything; they are selective. They take shortcuts by relying on the most accessible information sources. Frequent repetition of a given story at a national level focuses journalistic attention on that issue. The framing of a news story, therefore, is of critical importance in terms of the ultimate impact of a story.

There is little doubt that there is a deep sense of hurt, anger and betrayal felt by many, clergy and laity alike, as these scandals have come to light. Many priests share a sense of collective shame and guilt about what has happened in the Church. Parishioners are outraged that they and their children have been exposed to potential danger by the failure of Church authorities to alert them in known cases of abuse. Common to both priests and people is a sense of bewilderment, characterised in an anguished question: 'How could this ever happen?'

From the point of view of some church stalwarts, a 1995 leader in the *Offaly Topic* summed it up succinctly: '*For months, long-suffering Irish newspapers readers and radio and television listeners have been force-fed ... The manner in which public money, paid in license fees to RTE, has been used to attack and denigrate the majority church in this country over the past year has been nothing short of scandalous. ... The selective use of a small number of child abuse cases involving clergy has, for months provided a constant flow of headlines and opportunities for seeking to discredit anything Catholic.*'ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Such strident defense of the Church tells only half a truth: every case of abuse is scandalous, whether by members of the clergy or otherwise, and the Church has been deeply challenged by the forced revelation of these scandals by the Irish media.

The media are sometimes blamed for being the messenger as though they were in some way responsible for what has happened. This is clearly nonsense and was well refuted by a leader article in the *Sunday Tribune in 1995*; but the media'

own attribution of inappropriate blame, when it occurs, is both objectionable and unjust.^{iv} Media reports have been sometimes factual, sometimes sensational, but they have communicated to Irish society the very real need of addressing a hidden cancer in the Church. Media exposure of child sexual abuse by clergy has forced the Church to address the issue in a comprehensive, public manner.

In the midst of this reporting, the Irish Hierarchy was struggling to come to terms with what was happening and, at the same time, to produce a comprehensive set of policies that would offer the greatest possible protection against child sexual abuse. The result was the Framework Document, published in January 1996. While many commentators welcomed the focus on victims they were highly critical of the failure to deal with the issue of compensation.

Media coverage of the issue has focused, in part, on the damage done to victims. Such a focus is mirrored by the concern of the Church as evidenced by the Framework Document. Other elements of media coverage have concentrated on the abusers and on the Church itself. Exposure has been painful but it has helped to lance a festering boil. Why then are there negative reactions to the media coverage? Has not the Church been done a service? The answer may well be a combination of two elements: the sense of shame that many feel about the abuse that occurred from within, and the sense of anger, in part toward what is seen as unjust commentary from without. The feeling of betrayal of the gospel message compounds the sense of shame; that this abuse was done by clergy makes it all the more heinous. The sense of anger is more complex, reflecting an anger with abusers themselves, with Church authorities, and with external agents and commentators.

There can be little doubt that some of the reaction to the unfolding story of child sexual abuse has been a manifestation of denial. There is a danger that an article like this one which attempts to examine the media reportage of Church scandals may be seen by some at least, as a denial of the full extent of child sexual abuse and an unwillingness to acknowledge responsibility for such abuse

by members of the clergy. But criticism of the media does not of itself constitute denial. Denial has always been part of the social reaction to child sexual abuse. For example, Carol Smart recently documented the ongoing denial of the actuality and harm of child sexual abuse in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, despite the evidence of venereal disease in small children.^v

What the media do not have a right to do, however, is to mislead people into believing that abuse is a phenomenon almost entirely confined to Catholic clergy. It is this latter point that has been a particular source of annoyance to many people in the Church.

Gay Byrne, one of Ireland's most popular broadcasters, on his Radio 1 programme, in October 1995, opined that '*I don't believe now that Brendan Commiskey has gone to America because of stress, nor do I believe he's gone because of alcohol, nor do I believe he's gone because of his alleged protection of a priest who's up on charges. ... I think there is something else, and I think it is something dreadful, and I'm almost afraid of what it might be. That's my personal reaction.*'^{vi} (Commiskey, the Bishop of Ferns, had gone abroad to seek treatment of his alcoholism which he openly acknowledged.) What Byrne's 'something else' might be is left entirely to speculation. And there is little that can be offered by way of defence. Any rebuttal can readily be rejected with 'well, he would say that, wouldn't he?'

The antidote to this kind of material has been found within the media. The outspoken *Irish Times* columnist Kevin Myers, writing in August 1999: '*I recently wrote a column in defence of Nora Wall ... My column attracted a large private correspondence, but only one letter to the Editor. I am well acquainted with the phenomenon in this country that if people want to say something vituperatively abusive and personally offensive they have no problem in doing so publicly. ... But I have never experienced such vast disparity between private and public responses as on the Nora Wall affair, which could so easily have turned into one of the greatest injustices in Irish jurisprudential history. ... What is going on? Are*

we nowadays afraid to be seen defending the men and women of the cloth? Are we happy to see them corralled into the one great cattle-pen marked "abusers", and so to dismiss them from our history as no more than perverts and deviants? ... And for how much longer will tabloid headlines demonise human beings into caricatures of witchdom, the easier, no doubt, to burn them at the stake?"^{vii} This courageous column, challenging as it did elements of the media tide, was accompanied by a photograph of Brendan Smyth in a Roman collar. Smyth, a monk of the Norbertine community, was a notorious paedophile who died in prison.

One notable feature of media coverage of these scandals has been the use of Brendan Smyth as a symbol for the demise of Irish Catholicism. Smyth was initially jailed in 1994 in Northern Ireland for abuse and subsequently in the Republic of Ireland on similar charges. He died in prison. One now infamous photograph is used with great frequency. It shows Smyth wearing an open necked shirt and dark cardigan, his head thrusting forward menacingly toward the camera. It was taken on the occasion of a court hearing, with Smyth allegedly reacting angrily to the taunts of a photographer. Whatever about the circumstances of the photo in question, it has become the most frequently used icon of abuse in the Irish Church. As recently as July 2000, the *Evening Herald* used this photo, superimposed over a playground full of toys, in a general article dealing with paedophilia in Ireland. Brendan Smyth, the man buried in darkness by his shamed community, has become the poster boy for all that is wrong in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Smyth was certainly a sick man, who abused many victims. He should have been placed in a secure environment where he could have no access to children. There can be no defence of what he did. He is vilified at every opportunity. The use of his photo with such great frequency, however, tells us something more than the sorry tale of Brendan Smyth. Its use is increasingly common in stories connected with child sexual abuse, the internet, the Church in Ireland, falling vocations, psychiatric disorders, celibacy, and women priests. The photograph of

this dysfunctional, sick, and criminal individual is used to illustrate stories with which he has no connection. His image serves to associate extreme negativity with those people of the Church about whom the story is being told, because he was a priest. The Sunday World took this use to new heights with two headlines after the (subsequently-false) conviction of Nora Wall, a former Mercy sister: *'Rape nun's abuse pact with Smyth'*, and, *'Victims claim evil Wall provided kids to the paedo priest.'*^{viii} It is this kind of journalism that drives some of the anger felt within the Church, a reaction to all clergy being tarred with the same brush.

A further issue concern in the tabloid coverage of scandals involving the clergy, and paedophilia generally, is that of 'stranger danger'; the impression is given of a clearly identifiable foe, a monster that can be recognised and attacked on sight. The truth is that child abuse is much more likely to occur within the home; in the wake of the anti-paedophile demonstrations in the UK in August 2000 one British psychologist claimed that 98% of abusers were related to their victims. The failure to advert to the real dangers within the home by concentrating on those without does child protection a grave disservice.

This is exacerbated by a media concentration on clerical abusers to the virtual exclusion of most others. Some commentary on child sexual abuse has used specially created footage of an elderly, bead-carrying, soutane-clad priest walking along the aisle of a darkened church. RTE has used slow motion footage black-and-white footage of Smyth being led out of court. Phrases like 'paedophile farmer', or 'paedophile teacher', or 'paedophile journalist' are rarely if ever used, whereas 'paedophile priest' has a useful alliterative ring to it and is in common usage. Between August 1993 and August 2000, the Irish Times used the phrase paedophile priest 332 times. In the same period the phrase 'paedophile farmer' occurred 5 times, mostly in the context of the debate generated by Harry Ferguson over the 'paedophile priest' tag. In those seven years there is no instance of 'paedophile parent', 'paedophile teacher', or 'paedophile journalist' despite the conviction of persons from each of those categories for child sexual abuse. Nuala O'Faoláin was correct when she wrote that much of the disgust that

arises in relation to clerical child abuse is precisely because it is a cleric that is involved. But it is clearly untrue, unjust and dangerous to suggest, even by volume of coverage, that clergy are the primary abusers of children.

Some elements of the Press make a link between clerical celibacy and child sexual abuse. Those who make the case and those who argue against it can both be in error. If it were a simple causal link, then one would not expect to find married men being the primary abusers, as current research indicates. On the other hand, there is no denying the risks of an enforced celibacy which can be damaging to the human psyche and lead to inappropriate behaviours. There is a need for ongoing research in this area, not least for the sake of those celibate people who have committed their lives to the Church. Much is being done in houses of formation but perhaps more needs to be done for those in the field. References to what Canon Law says on this issue are simply unhelpful. As I have written in another forum, I do not believe that priests can survive without intimacy in their lives. I continue to believe that for priests, the only hope of dealing effectively with the challenge and privation of celibacy is to have close friends with whom they can share hopes and dreams and fears and failures, as well as being accountable to them for their lifestyles.

Child sexual abuse is a significant issue for our time, an ugly secret long buried and hidden away. It is high time that it was confronted. Media coverage has been helpful in this respect. Healing can only come with acknowledgement of what has taken place. As the gospel puts it, the truth will set us free. It is important, therefore, that the whole truth be told about child sexual abuse, namely, that it is not confined to one segment of the community. It is in this regard that valid criticism can be made of certain media coverage. Such a plea for an all-encompassing approach to the issue does not address the issue of the heinousness of abuse by people who say they represent God on earth. Much remains to be done within the Church, not least in terms of compensation, which is currently only achievable through a civil and, by definition, contentious process. Much also needs to be done in terms of restoration of credibility.

There will always be a tabloid press, which delights in prurience and has little sensitivity for privacy or fairness. Typical of such coverage is an article in *The Star* with the headline '*Perverts swap sick tales in prison.*' The article is accompanied by a named photograph of a priest serving a sentence for abuse.^{ix} But in the body of the article, 5 paragraphs in, the reader is told that the priest in question is not one of those trumpeted in the headline. Such shoddy journalism, however, cannot be allowed to obscure the task of the Church in this process. It is understandable that good people in the Church are angry when coverage is biased, untruthful or sensationalised. But such anger must not be allowed to deflect the Church from its correct focus, which has to be on healing for victims and prevention of further cases.

Finally, the Church must consider the damage done to parish and religious communities where abusers have served, and in the wider Church community as a whole. Trust has been lost, many good people are deeply disturbed by the revelations, and some have walked away. Recent surveys indicate that the greatest blame is being laid at the feet of those in leadership. Loss of faith in local clergy, for example, is significantly less than loss of faith in the bishops. The changes that are required should be made because they are right, not because the Church is forced to make them.

In summary, Irish society has been well served by the media revelations of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious, despite the misgivings outlined above. But diagnosis alone is insufficient; a treatment is also required. The media can play a central role in the public debate on the whole issue of child sexual abuse, and can contribute richly to the public understanding of this phenomenon by reporting of the latest scholarship in this field. Such analysis must recognise that the problem is greater than the Catholic Church. Failure to do so only compounds the problem, helps abusers to hide, and delays the possibility of healing for all who are victims. Yes, the truth will set us free, but it must be the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Reference List

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