The Service of a Different Kingdom: Child Sexual Abuse and the Response of the Church

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Introduction

This paper sets out to explore theologically some aspects of the recent Irish experience of child sexual abuse by priests and religious and to assess the implications for the life and ministry of the church.

The insights of psychologists, of lawyers and of other professionals are indispensable to the church at this time. But the church is not like any other body in society. The church has a unique mandate to proclaim God's unconditional love, to embody it and to model this love for all of humankind. When church personnel abuse children, something has gone drastically wrong, and it strikes at the very nature of the church. It is my contention that only a theological reflection, in dialogue with the work of psychologists and the experience of counsellors, can unpack fully the significance of recent events for the mission of the church.

This paper attempts such a theological reflection. The first part will take up comments by people who have worked with victims and offenders and suggest some implications for the church's self-understanding and for society as a whole. The second part will re-visit the core message of Christianity and in that light suggest that the experience both of victims of sexual abuse and sexual offenders needs to be listened to by the church if it is to fulfil its mission at this challenging time.

Sexual abuse and dominative power

Olive Travers, in her book *Behind the Silhouettes*, argues that sexual abuse is often as much about control and power as it is about

sex; that the control which sex offenders exercise over their victims serves as a compensation for the powerlessness they feel in relationships with other adults.[1] Non-fixated offenders, and most priests and religious who abuse belong in this category, usually perceive themselves as powerless. At the same time, they can hold rigid views about the traditional roles of men and women in society.[2]

Marie Keenan, a psychotherapist with the Granada Institute, Dublin, believes that power imbalances in society are part of the culture that allows sexual abuse to thrive.[3] Specifically with regard to clergy who have offended, she has commented that few of them are sexual deviants as such. However, they have had great difficulty in dealing with their sexuality and with holding positions of power:

> Where they (clergy) come off the page in assessment is in terms of sexual conflict and uncontrolled hostility ... a tiny minority of abusive priests had a psychologically deviant profile but many had great difficulty in dealing with their sexuality or dealing with having positions of power and yet a feeling of no power over their own lives.[4]

The English Benedictine, Sebastian Moore, also discusses the relationship between clergy sexual misconduct and the exercise of power. In a recent collection of essays published to honour his eightieth birthday, Moore writes:

> Celibate priesthood is extraordinarily symptomatic of the arrested condition of the Western male. We are the sons of Mother Church, our phallic energy exiled in obedience to her command. Our history shows, especially in the higher echelons of the priesthood, the resultant transformation of phallic energy into dominative power. And now our order is manifesting, to an embarrassing degree, the symptoms of denial, of resistance to the change which is being demanded of man generally ... as dioceses are bankrupting themselves with lawsuits over our sexual irregularities ...[5]

Moore situates the relatively small number of sexual misconduct cases by clergy within the wider context of abuse of power

in the church. Western culture, according to Moore, has been characterised by this need among men to dominate, and the church, far from challenging this tendency, is in danger of being the last bastion of it in Western society.[6]

Some may hold that male sexual energy and dominative power find symbolic expression in spires and obelisks, but there are more serious examples to be considered which have done immense damage to the mission and ministry of the church. Mention must be made straight away of the deliberate and persistent exclusion of women from any decision-making or authoritative leadership role in the church. There are other examples:

- The persistence of a hierarchical model of authority and of decision-making;
- The desire to hold on to authority positions late into life;
- The reluctance of priests to share decisions with laity and even with fellow-priests (as this becomes increasingly embarrassing, there is some reluctant acceptance of the need for 'consultation');
- A theology of sacraments which emphasises the 'power of the priest' and what only he can 'do';
- Attitudes to the charism of celibacy: arguments in favour of it being obligatory for priests; the opinion that it is a superior state to that of marriage;
- Images of God which are male, authoritarian and judgmental;
- A preoccupation with titles and honours;
- The many different bachelor shields, from a preoccupation with computers to fast cars.

The 'still arrested condition of the Western male', as Moore puts it, also finds expression in certain kinds of devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Surely it is no coincidence that some of the most rigid of Catholic clerics have an almost fanatical devotion to the Virgin-Mother of God?[7]

The psychological evidence referred to earlier would seem to suggest that few clerical sexual offenders are technically sexual deviants. It would seem, however, that frequent their abuse of

children has to do with power and control, and their inability to resolve such issues in a mature way. There are many instances of the abuse of power and control by priests and religious other than sexual abuse. For the most part, these abuses are not illegal and therefore do not lead to criminal charges. However, in terms of the church's self-understanding, these are no less wrong and sinful. In terms of the church's unique mission to the world, they are no less dimming of the light the church is called to be, in the darkness of everyday exploitation, injustice, and violation of human dignity.

It is remarkable that the revelation of abuse, both physical and sexual, by priests and religious has been like music to the ears of so many people, including practising Catholics. The sad reality is that while few experienced this kind of abuse themselves, many experienced other kinds of abuse of power by authorities in the church. When many Catholics hear about cases of abuse, I believe that in their own minds, perhaps unconsciously, they connect these stories with their own memories of abuse and hurt by clerics. These memories have never found expression until now. The cases of Child Sexual Abuse may have become a vehicle for the expression of a wider experience of the abuse of church power.

The reaction so far: scapegoating

There is a tendency in the media to make sexual offenders seem as unlike the ordinary person as possible. But as Travers notes, 'sex offenders are just like us. We all have the potential within us to abuse ... All of us are abusive in our relationships to some degree. We lose our tempers with children, we use our power over them, we let our moods determine their treatment.'[8] The response has been to distance us as far as possible from sexual offenders. Cameras in slow motion and graphic headlines attempt to portray abusers as a subhuman species. Society demands lengthy prison sentences as punishment. Within prison, sexual offenders must be segregated from 'ordinary decent criminals'. On release, no community wants them. There are calls for the regist-

ration and/or the tagging of sex offenders, the twenty-first century equivalent of 'branding', a practice most societies would now consider barbaric.

It is superficial to see these responses as motivated only by a concern for the sensibilities of victims or the protection of children.[9] The truth is that sexual offenders are a painful reminder to all of us of our own potential to abuse and hurt others, especially in areas of sexuality and relationships. By distancing ourselves from sexual offenders, we can distance ourselves from that part of us which we do not even wish to acknowledge. Travers refers to this as scapegoating. Scapegoating, according to the cultural theorist René Girard, is the most primitive means of restoring order and harmony in a community.[10]

Since the beginning of time, communities have been establishing themselves 'over against' individuals whom they have identified as a threat. Community is formed or re-formed in working together to defeat a common enemy; unlikely alliances are forged and potentially divisive squabbles are resolved or left aside. When the perceived enemy has been defeated and expelled, and when harmony is restored to the community, the community finds it is in a better state than before. It is then presumed that all the ills which beset the community were in fact the fault of the individual now expelled and that it is his/her defeat and expulsion which has brought about the new spirit of co-operation and understanding.

This concept of scapegoating explains some of the reaction to sexual offenders in contemporary Irish society and in the media. First of all, sexual offenders serve as scapegoats for our general discomfort with our sexuality. In Ireland, within a few short years, we have gone from being a society within which even mature discussion of sex was taboo, to one which not only condones but also actively encourages all sexual activity so long as consent is given. Every day of the week, sexuality is violated and exploited in the interests of the market and the media. The images, which titillate us all, whether in tabloids or on television or in films, create an environment which supports sexual viola-

tion and exploitation. They lead us to think that all our sexual dreams and fantasies can be satisfied, and that we have a right to satisfy them. They caricature any form of conscience with regard to sexuality.

At some deep place in ourselves we know that sexuality is precious and sacred. Yet we rarely challenge the popular sexual discourse and images. It is reassuring, therefore, to have a clearly labelled class of people called 'sexual offenders' over against whom we can assure ourselves of our own sexual propriety. Sex offenders are those whose sexual lives are out of control. The rest of us are ok.

Sex offenders must take full responsibility for their crimes. They are guilty of horrific violations of human dignity. At the same time, however, they may be innocent of much for which society punishes them. It is no more their fault than it is ours that we live in a society in which sex is the most marketable of commodities. It is not their fault that we live in a society which is sexually immature, in which many people are frightened of their sexuality, and find it difficult to express it in ways that build relationships and give life in every sense of the term. It is not their fault that we live in a society which, despite the prosperity of some, leaves many of its citizens disempowered and with a sense of helplessness, which is in turn compensated for by a variety of forms of addiction. It is not their fault that public attitudes make it very difficult for people in trouble with their sexuality to seek help. Lastly, it is not their fault that there is so little help available for the few who have the courage to seek it.

At some level we know all this, and occasionally we feel guilty about it. But the existence of a clearly labelled category of criminals makes it easier for us to run away from the criminal neglect in which we all share as members of society.

The church can scapegoat offenders too

Turning to the reaction within the church, we find that many priests and religious, including those in leadership, have shown great compassion and understanding towards colleagues con-

victed of sexual abuse. Their capacity to cope with a colleague who has offended has been determined by their own level of self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Many have realised that 'but for the grace of God' it could be them. Some, while journeying with imprisoned colleagues, have heard the call to travel a painful road of personal reflection themselves, reviewing their own sexuality and how it finds celibate expression.

Bishops and congregational leaders genuinely have been torn in their efforts to be compassionate and, at the same time, pastorally responsible to victim and offender. At one level, the protection of children, legal considerations, and the public demand for justice has determined church policy. At a deeper level, however, there are signs of scapegoating within the church as well, signs that it has been considered better 'to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed'.[11] As Girard notes, expulsion is always unifying. It restores order and harmony to the community. It enables the flock to believe it is 'pure' again. It encourages the view that while there may have been one or two 'rotten apples', the barrel itself is sound. The permanent exclusion from active ministry of priests and religious who have been convicted of sexual offences allows us to believe that with it, all clerical problems have been resolved and that we can get back to business as usual. The clerical caste, as such, remains intact and deeper questions need not be asked. We need not ask, for example, how much energy and resources we have invested in the on-going care and support of priests. We need not raise questions about the kind of structures of organisation that are in place and whether or not they permit or encourage priests and religious to relate and behave in a mature manner. And we can dismiss as irrelevant questions about the appropriateness of a highly authoritarian, exclusively male celibate style of leadership.

Psychologists and prison officials call repeatedly for society to move beyond the dynamic of scapegoating. They urge us all to reflect on our shared culpability with regard to sexual crime.[12] They actively seek a role for communities in responding to of-

fenders and for a shift from retributive to restorative models of justice. The church needs to put its full weight behind such calls. As we shall now go on to see, such calls are precisely in accord with gospel principles. However, the church is in a weak position to support these worthwhile demands unless it is itself prepared to implement them within its own ranks.

Jesus Christ and forgiveness of enemies

A close examination of the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ shows that, *in principle*, the church is well placed to call people out of their instinctive reaction to sexual abuse into a response which promotes healing and which upholds the dignity both of victim and offender. In order to appreciate this, we must take a fresh look at Jesus as portrayed in the gospels.[13]

Jesus made it possible for all people to understand that God's unlimited graciousness was the most original and firm basis for human relationships. However, as a race we had 'fallen' into a different, damaging and destructive manner of being in the world. Instead of relying for our identity on the fact that we were creatures of a gracious God, we felt we had status only when others considered us to be important. We sought security not in God's fidelity to us but in the fact that we owned or possessed more than other people did. Our sense of our own goodness depended on us defining others as less good than ourselves. We were united to people not by the realisation that we were all brothers and sisters, but because we found some other people whom we considered our common enemies. We emphasised their otherness and we confirmed our shared identity by defining ourselves over against them. Violence against other people became acceptable as a way of defending our place in the world and of holding on to our sense of dignity and well-being. When someone hurt us, we came to believe that we had to hit back or else we would be seen as weak.

Scapegoating became an acceptable and even necessary way of achieving social order and harmony. Hebrew religion had, for

centuries, made use of an actual scapegoat upon whom the sins of the people were periodically unburdened and who was then driven out into the desert. The evil was thus understood to be removed from people's midst. But this ritual practice was only a reflection of what was happening every day: adulteresses were stoned, demoniacs banished, tax collectors ostracised, lepers outcast, and sinners were considered excluded from both God's company and that of decent people.

Jesus stepped right into the middle of this way of being in the world and called for a total halt to it. He said:

> You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you ... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.[14]

When we read this text, our first reaction might be that it requires people to accept violence and abuse as their lot, to 'put up' with it, hoping that somehow in the end God will make it up to them. This and other texts have been so interpreted in the past. But that was not the meaning or the intention of Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus is calling people to take the most radical and powerful stand that is possible against violence by refusing to allow themselves to be drawn into it by those who violate or abuse them.

Jesus called for a new basis for human relationships. In the end he offered his life as that basis. If people needed a victim to be the source of unity with one another, then he was prepared to be that victim. Jesus very deliberately stepped outside the cycle

of violence and he showed that people are most fully human, most fully themselves, when they do what he did. God's resurrection of Jesus completes the story. Faced with the gravest provocation of all, the murder of God's own son, God still refuses to be drawn into the reciprocity of violence but responds instead with the ultimate gesture of love, the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of eternal life for all, which it signifies.

What Jesus wanted was for all people, whether rich or poor, to be truly free. And the path to true freedom was paved only with God's unconditional love. As long as we depend on the approval of others for our sense of well-being, we are not free. As long as we need to see others as bad so that we can feel good about ourselves, we are not free. As long as we allow the behaviour of others towards us, whether benevolent or hostile, to determine the extent of our graciousness and self-giving, we are not free.

Our *self-giving* is most clearly tested when it comes to the question of *for-giving*. It is at this point that we come most clearly to recognise the fundamental principles by which we have chosen to live our lives. When somebody wrongs us, it might appear that the natural response is to seek revenge, to retaliate. But what Jesus showed is that *this is not the most natural response.* The most original human response, the response that most accords with true human nature, is to forgive. To forgive is to decide that the person who has offended will not define or limit the extent of my graciousness and self-giving. To forgive is to decide that, even in the face of hurt and violation, I will continue to take the risk of giving of myself. To forgive is to decide that I still trust in the power of love to heal and transform, and this despite the horrible violation and hurt that has occurred.

I can only forgive if I do not depend on the 'putting down' of the person who has wronged me in order that I can stand up straight again. I can only forgive if I know that I do not need the wrongdoer's pain in order to feel good about myself. The only thing that can ultimately heal me is the conviction that I am loved exactly as I am and that this love for me is the only thing

that matters. If I believe this, then I *must* forgive in order to be true to this love and true to my deepest self. Anything short of forgiveness is allowing the wrongdoer to have the last word regarding the extent of my self-giving.

Sexual abuse is possibly the most difficult of all violations to forgive. Sexuality belongs to that which is most intimate in us. Through our sexuality we can physically express our nature as gracious, self-giving beings. When somebody violates us sexually, they damage this nature. Rape literally means to seize and carry off something. When somebody is raped, it is their capacity to give of themselves which is seized and plundered. The very aspect of their nature by which people enflesh their desire to give of themselves totally, is sacrileged.

It is a moment of breakthrough in terms of healing when victims of horrendous sexual abuse come to forgive those who have violated them. It is also, according to psychologists, a necessary moment in the healing process:

> Anger and lack of forgiveness can keep the adult victim locked in a destructive relationship with her abuser and allow the abuser to continue to ruin their lives. Forgiving does not mean excusing, but it allows the adult to let go of her own crippling anger and resentment and desire to punish her abuser. A rich spiritual life can give adult victims the strength to bear the pain of what has been done to them and to rebuild their lives.[15]

What Christianity has to offer is precisely that conviction at which victims of sexual abuse most need to arrive. It is the conviction that I am loved exactly as I am, and that my deepest self is held in being by God's love for me. By remembering this love I am able to forgive my enemies by acting towards them in a way that is gratuitous, by breaking out of the cycle of hatred, by refusing to be entrapped within the reciprocity of violence.

Christianity has also something to offer the perpetrators of sexual abuse. To them it says, it is only a superficial part of yourself that you seek to gratify by sexual abuse. You are grasping and seeking after a sense of well-being by overpowering others,

by dominating them, by attempting to steal love from them, by forcing them to express bodily an acceptance of you for which you crave. But what you crave in your deepest self, that is unconditional love and acceptance, is already yours as a gift if only you could realise it, and if only you had the courage and the humility to accept it.

It has more to say to the offender. It says, faced with the shame of your sexual abuse of another person, Christianity asks you not to think that this defines you as a person. It is God's love and this alone which defines you, not anything you do, whether good or evil. You cannot shake off this love. It is unconditional. When you realise fully the enormity of what you have done you may be tempted to despair. Your sense of self-worth may have been totally eroded by a sense of self-hatred. It is at this moment that you, just like your victim, must remember God's love.

God's gratuitous love is always there in our lives. It is not as if something new is added in the face of our sin and need of forgiveness. Forgiveness, rather, is the particular form which God's love takes when faced with the reality of our sin. Sin not only sunders our relationships with those against whom we sin. It also sunders our relationship with our deepest selves. When we sin we lose contact with our own goodness. We see only our sin and are tempted to allow ourselves to be defined by it. But God's love offers to restore us to ourselves, to heal us. It as if God says to us, 'I know there is more to you than what you have done. I see that. I want you to see that yourself. I know that there is goodness in you that is deeper and more original than your sinful action. I believe in that goodness. I restore you to it and I want you to live out of it.'

A mission to the church

Victims of sexual abuse who arrive at some level of healing, and abusers who come to acknowledge the full significance of their wrongful actions, realise that violence and hatred, revenge and retribution cannot bring them peace. They have reached a vacuum in their humanity that only gratuitous, self-giving and forgiving

love can fill. Difficult as it is to believe, many victims of sexual abuse by priests and religious still turn to Christian faith, if not to the church, in order to be healed. They do so because they have plumbed the dark and hidden depths of their humanity. And they know, in the light of their painful journey, that only a God who loves as the God of Christ does, who 'loves humanity at its worst' (Moore), can re-fashion their lives.

These people have a mission to the church. They call the church to recover its own hidden depths in Jesus Christ which have been obscured by centuries of conformity to the very kinds of exercise of power, and sources of status and security, which Christ abhorred. Whether as victims or abusers, these people bear the marks of the worst excesses of the abusive power we are all inclined to wield by virtue of our fallen nature. They more than anyone else know its futility.

According to Pope John Paul II, the church 'needs heralds of the gospel who are experts in humanity, who have penetrated the depths of the human heart'. The church has been sent such heralds from among those who have survived the trauma of sexual abuse, whether as victims or offenders. We are being called to listen to them, to listen to their stories and to listen to what the very occurrence of sexual abuse within the church is saying to us. Disturbed Catholics ask when it all will finish. They long for an end to the revelations and the scandals, the constant undermining in the media. They cannot wait for a bright new chapter in the life of the church. In this paper, I have been suggesting that we have a long distance to go until we reach that new chapter. We have a long and painful path of conversion to travel first, a path that will lead us to re-discover the foundations of the church and to re-examine our way of being in the world in the light of our discoveries. However, until we go down that path, regardless of how correctly we celebrate ritual and cite formulae, 'the Christian faith is not being taught, and the words have been pressed into service of a different kingdom.'[16]

Notes:

1. Olive Travers, *Behind the Silhouettes*, Belfast: Blackstaff, 1999, 74.
2. By 'non-fixated' is meant offenders who do not have a primary sexual preference for children but who turn to children for sexual satisfaction to compensate for difficulties in (sexual) relationships with other adults. These offenders are not, strictly speaking, paedophiles (Cf Travers, *Behind the Silhouettes*, 47).
3. Address to the NCPI Conference, Athlone, 26 April 1999.
4. Marie Keenan, quoted in the *Irish Independent*, 26 April 1999.
5. Sebastian Moore, 'The Bedded Axle-Tree', *Jesus Crucified and Risen*, William Loewe and Vernon Gregson (Eds), Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998, 218.
6. Moore offers the explanation that the Western male psyche has not advanced beyond a relationship to women that is shaped by the relationship of the young man to his mother. Men first encounter women in the role of son to mother. In this relationship men sense the overwhelming 'natural' superiority of women as mothers and, though they grow up physically, emotionally they are unable to move beyond this first relationship into a partnership of equality. Thus, men seek to subjugate women in an effort to overcome their feelings of inferiority towards them. To compensate for women's 'natural' supremacy, men have developed a 'cultural' pre-eminence. In a state of emotional fixation on the mother, there is no place for male sexual energy, which must find other outlets.
7. Moore is very supportive of an authentic Marian piety. In fact, he sees in the doctrine of the Virginal Birth of Christ a reversal of the usual pattern of (1) woman in society subject to man for status; (2) woman dominates man as son; (3) man still 'son' emotionally, fashions domination through the organs of culture. The Virgin Mary is subject to God alone and therefore does not have to dominate the Son, who in turn does not have to dominate her. Instead, Mother participates in the Son's work of mediating the mystery of redemption.
8. Olive Travers, interviewed in *The Irish Times*, 15 Feb 1999. Cf her book, p. 46.
9. 'Both offenders and victims are members of society and what we have to say about them also applies to us. We have to ask ourselves in what ways we are victims and/or offenders and to what extent we have contributed to the abusive behaviour and twisted thinking which resulted in sexual abuse' (Travers, 90).
10. Cf, for example, *Violence and the Sacred*, London: John Hopkins Press, 1977. Girard's work has been taken up by a number of theologians. Most notable are Raymund Schwager, *Must there be Scapegoats?*

Violence and Redemption in the Bible, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987, and James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong, Original Sin through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroad, 1998.

11. John 11:50.

12. '... we are ourselves either colluding with a society which tolerates abuse or seeking to live in one which discourages abusive relationships at all levels. We need to be less complacent about the media messages which exploit and objectify sexuality' (Travers, 112).

13. Here the author wishes to acknowledge the work of James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong, Original Sin through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroad, 1998.

14. Matthew 5:38ff.

15. Travers, 105. Speaking at the National Conference of Priests of Ireland Conference on Child Sexual Abuse, May 1998, a law lecturer at NUI Galway, Dr Tom O'Malley, stated that, 'Victims' desire for revenge might not be in the best interest of victims themselves and only prolong their suffering.'

16. Alison, p. 2.