

Caring for Clergy Offenders

Author(s): Eamonn Conway

Source: *The Furrow*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Apr., 2003), pp. 218-224

Published by: The Furrow

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27664722>

Accessed: 07-12-2018 12:26 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Furrow is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Furrow*

Caring for Clergy Offenders

Eamonn Conway

Sex offenders are viewed as the lepers in our society, and clergy sex offenders are considered to be among the worst. Let's be honest here: it is not just by wider society. We priests are genuinely angry at the crimes of clergy offenders and we wonder if we're being untrue to our anger if we reach out to them. It is easier for us to avoid them altogether.¹ But how much of our anger towards abusers is really more about us than about our concern for the victims – more about our own sense of having been betrayed? To be even more honest, has it not also to do with our own deep and mostly unexplored fears that there, but for the grace of God, go we? Are not these men reminders of the many compromises, failures and infidelities that have marked our own clawing back on the promises we made at our ordination?

In what follows, I wish to argue that we must care for clergy offenders. That the focus here is on clergy who have abused is not to imply that the Christian community has less of a responsibility for others whose crimes have left them abandoned and uncared for. But there are a number of specific reasons why the Church should care for priests who have offended.

I will be making the case that the Church as institution must share the blame for sexual abuse by clergy. Let me emphasise, however, that each abuser must individually be held accountable for his actions and take responsibility for them. In arguing that the

1. In this context a recent account of a child protection study day organised by the UK National Conference of Priests is of interest. Shaun Middleton states that Fr Andrew Clark, a prison chaplain, pointed out that a priest's family was his diocese and asked if it was right for his family to abandon him when he ended up in prison. In reply, 'Archbishop Nichols ... said that it was too difficult while these priests were serving their sentences to have any reasonable and constructive dialogue with them. He felt it was better to resume a more formal contact after the sentence had been completed' (*The Tablet*, 8 February 2003, p. 46).

Eamonn Conway is a priest of the Tuam diocese and Head of Department, Theology and Religious Studies, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, where he also co-directs the Centre for Culture, Technology and Values.

CARING FOR CLERGY OFFENDERS

institution can be co-responsible for abuse and therefore has responsibilities towards the abusers as well as victims/survivors, there is no intention to condone in any way the abusive behaviour or exonerate the abuser. To argue for care is not to condone.

THE INSTITUTION IS PART OF THE PROBLEM

As a Christian community we must care for clergy offenders because the institution has been part of the problem. While we need to emphasise continuously the fact that only a small percentage of sexual abuse is perpetrated by clergy, abuse even by one cleric represents systemic failure, especially when we realise what the Christian community is meant to be about. The Christian community is the body of Christ that re-presents in the world God's total, unconditional, self-giving, forgiving love. That a priest could go through a system of formation and continue many years functioning as a priest, all the while missing or refusing God's offer of selfless love while supposedly ministering it to others; desperately compensating for its absence in his life by manipulative sex and power games with little children, means the institution has failed him and those to whom he was assigned to minister.

It is a further failure that priests who found themselves addicted to sexual pleasure of this kind felt that they could not turn to a brother priest or their bishop for help, despite all the apparent clerical *bonhomie*. It is also a failure of the institution, and one that remains unaddressed, that priests were operating without effective systems of accountability. There was clear and chronic institutional failure also where priests, when the abuse situation became known, were not dealt with firmly but compassionately, and victims responded to with honesty and sensitivity.

There is another sense in which the institution has failed. It seems that in therapy priests who have abused are found to have very negative God imagery, and 'come off the page' in terms of unresolved issues relating to conflict, authority and power.² This raises serious questions about the quality of their initial and continuing formation, both in terms of theology and personal development. What systems were in place with regard to the 'quality control' of seminary formation and theological education?

Related to this is the fact that the institution failed to support the emergence and empowerment of a theologically educated laity that could have challenged these institutional defects, defects that have been apparent in the institution for some time.

2. Noted by Marie Keenan in a paper to the European Society for Catholic Theology's Jonah Project on Clerical Sexual Abuse, Nov. 2002. Cf. M. Keenan (2002), 'Child Sexual Abuse: the Heart of the Matter', *The Furrow*, Nov. 2002.

THE FURROW

We could go on. We could speak, for instance, of the appointment to senior positions in the Church of people who lacked the abilities needed to deal with these kinds of issues. What is important in the context of this discussion is to accept that the institution of the Church has, at least in these ways, been complicit in the sexual abuse of children by clergy offenders, whether through weakness or sinfulness.

The Church as an institution is sinful.³ This should not surprise us, though we may be as reluctant to acknowledge this as we are to acknowledge our personal sinfulness. To state, as John Paul II did last year, that we have been afflicted by the sins of our brothers 'who have betrayed the grace of their ordination',⁴ simply does not go far enough. As an institution and as a Christian community, we share in the weakness and sinfulness of our brothers. They are carrying, along with their own culpability, blame for our sins of omission and commission as well. For all these reasons the institution must accept that it has been part of the problem and so must acknowledge its duty of care for clergy offenders.

THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND VICTIMS' CONCERNS

Another argument in favour of caring for clergy offenders is the need to ensure that children are safe. There is genuine concern that priests who have abused once may do so again. Although some dioceses have very good programmes of care for clergy who have been charged and/or convicted of child sex offences, others would seem to be doing little or nothing for priest offenders. This is dangerous. Why is there no national policy on this?

Victims/survivors want, and are entitled to, every assurance possible that offenders are no longer in a position to abuse children. They know that for this to happen priest offenders must be cared for by their communities, with supports that include ongoing therapy as well as stable accommodation and perhaps some form of work. These are the conditions in which people are least likely to re-offend, and victims/survivors accept that. Ex-priests who are forced to live anonymously, ostracised by their former clerical colleagues and possibly by their families, with

3. Cf. K. Rahner (1969), 'The Church of Sinners', *Theological Investigations 6*, 253-269; 'The sinful Church in the decrees of Vatican II', *Theological Investigations 6*, 270-295 (London: DLT).

4. 'At this time, too, as priests we are personally and profoundly afflicted by the sins of some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of ordination in succumbing even to the most grievous forms of the *mysterium iniquitatis* (mystery of evil) at work in the world. Grave scandal is caused, with the result that a dark shadow of suspicion is cast over all the other fine priests who perform their ministry with honesty and integrity and often with heroic self-sacrifice' (Pope John Paul II, Letter to Priests, Holy Thursday, 2002).

little chance of employment, become a greater risk to children.⁵

Incidentally, some victims/survivors show a level of consideration for their abusers that goes beyond concerns about protection of children. They want their abusers to receive the help that they need to recover from their perverse addictive behaviour. They can accept the 'sickness' of the individual abuser more quickly than they can the failings of the institution that put the abuser in a position where he could abuse, and bestowed upon him a *persona* of holiness and omnipotence that exacerbated the damage caused.

INSTITUTIONAL SELF-PROTECTION

A third argument in favour of caring for clerical sexual offenders might appeal most to those who are concerned about protecting the reputation of the Church as an institution. Institutional self-protection has shown itself to be a powerful motivation in the Church. We now know that in the past, cases of abuse were covered up for fear of scandal. This was done by quietly moving priests who had abused to new appointments where their previous record of abusive behaviour was unknown.

In the present, institutional self-protection tends to take the form of a 'zero tolerance' policy with regard to sexual offences by clergy. Even one small indication of sexual immaturity today and a priest could be removed immediately from ministry.⁶ If he has committed a criminal offence, he is heading for dismissal from priesthood. Depending on the diocese to which he belongs, he may be cut off entirely. Where is this policy likely to lead us?

Purely from a pragmatic point of view, if a clergy offender (even one who has been expelled from priesthood) re-offends, victims/survivors groups and media will want to know what on-going care this person had at his disposal. It may well be that some clergy offenders refuse to co-operate with systems of care offered by the diocese. But unless such systems are in place, the institution remains vulnerable to the charge that it has failed once again to act to protect children.

There are other problems with a policy of 'zero tolerance'. Such a policy does not seem to show much understanding, for example, of the dynamics of sexuality, or acceptance of the fact that achieving sexual maturity and integration is a difficult process. To be honest, many of us clergy survive by suppressing rather than by integrating our sexual drive. Did any of us really receive adequate formation with regard to celibacy? What

5. Allowing them to persist in such a state could also be a violation of Canon 1350 (esp #2) which obliges an Ordinary to provide 'in the best way possible' for those dismissed from the clerical state who are in genuine need.

6. This means removal not only from his place of work but from his home and his community as well.

THE FURROW

systematic support is there for this area of our lives now? Even if support were provided, would the clerical culture allow us to avail of it? Sexual maturity does not simply happen. It must be worked at. Does a policy of 'zero tolerance' support priests who struggle to become mature in their understanding and expression of their sexual drive? Is imposing such a policy not simply taking the easy option? How does a climate of 'zero tolerance' impact on clergy who are living lives of quiet desperation? Does it not in fact increase their sense of isolation and make them even more reluctant to seek help?

WE ARE ALL *MI* POSITIVE

The present policy for dealing with Child Sexual Abuse in the Church understands sexual immaturity and deviance as one might understand an infectious disease. Among the clergy there are priests who walk like us, talk like us, who preach like us and celebrate Mass like us. But they are not like us. To express this in the language employed by Pope John Paul II, *we* are 'fine priests who perform (our) ministry with honesty and integrity and often with heroic self-sacrifice'; *they* carry the destructive virus called '*mysterium iniquitatis*'.⁷ By their deviousness, and because of inadequate selection processes, they got in. Now they must be got out. We must continue to pray that only people who are free from this disease are selected in the future. As with a farmer who finds that one of his herd suffers from mad cow disease, the task is to isolate and destroy in order to save as many as one can. It may be cruel, but then 'it is better that one man should die for the people'.

This is classical scapegoating in the interests of self-protection.⁸ It is an example of exactly the kind of policies of exclusion that Jesus condemned. It is unacceptable and can have no place in the Christian community. As essentially unchristian, it cannot protect the Church in the long-term. It can only undermine it grievously. It is a fundamental Christian insight that to some degree we are all infected with one or another form of the *mysterium iniquitatis*. We are all '*MI* positive', so to speak. Through Christ, the one we come to know as *Abba* reaches lovingly into the twisted contortions of the human heart with words and gestures of healing and forgiveness. We are invited into a relationship; we are guided on a journey towards wholeness.

7. Cf. endnote 3. The validity of the ordination of homosexuals, for example, was called into question in early March 2002 by Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls in an interview to *The New York Times*: 'people with (homosexual) inclinations just cannot be ordained'.

8. Cf. E. Conway, 'The Service of a Different Kingdom: Child Sexual Abuse and the response of the Catholic Church' in E. Conway et al (1999), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse* (Dublin: Columba), p. 77.

CARING FOR CLERGY OFFENDERS

Co-operation with God's gracious presence in our lives does not happen overnight. The Church, both as institution and as Christian community, has no credibility if it is not present to and prepared to journey with those who are trapped in patterns of behaviour that are destructive both of themselves and of others. As Church, it is not enough to challenge, lecture or punish. We must, if we are truly to be the sacrament of Christ, mediate with patience and persistence the love and care that liberates.

FROM THE *MYSTERIUM INIQUITATIS* TO THE *MYSTERIUM CRUCIS*

Over the last few years I have had occasion to visit some priest offenders in prison. While I have been revolted at their crimes, I have equally been overwhelmed and humbled by how some of them have come to terms honestly and painfully with their darkness and have experienced genuine remorse. Some of these men have discovered the true meaning of Christianity for the first time in the process of recognising their wrongdoing. And maybe that is why we find it hard to face them. Because in their presence we realise that some of what we go on with as priests is only a sham. Faced with the enormity of their crimes, faced with the realisation that the damage and the hurt that they have caused to vulnerable children is irretrievable, for some clergy offenders at least there is no further room for pretence. It is radical surrender to the unconditional love and forgiveness of Christ, or total collapse.

Sebastian Moore says that our first real conviction that God loves us takes place in the context of our self-discovery that we are crucifiers.⁹ In his Holy Thursday letter 2002, already cited, the Pope went on to urge us to embrace the *mysterium crucis*. Those I have met in prison, some of whom had ministered as priests for decades, discovered for the first time in their lives the meaning of the *mysterium crucis* as they gradually acknowledged themselves to be crucifiers of innocent, vulnerable children. Their discovery has made it possible for them to live with themselves and in new ways with the Lord. It also challenges and humbles the rest of us, because we realise that so much in our lives is far removed from their surrender to the mystery of the cross.

LOVED AT OUR WORST

Paradoxical and provocative as it is to say, the Christian community needs its priest offenders. They can help us to come to accept the mystery of the incarnation that humanity is loved at its worst:

To be convinced of my acceptance, I must know that I am accepted at my worst. God shows me to myself as worse than I had ever conceived in order to leave me no possible

9. S. Moore (1977), *The Crucified Jesus is no Stranger* (NY: Paulist), p. 2.

THE FURROW

room for doubt – that is to say no possible *further* experience of evil that might create doubt – that he loves and accepts me.¹⁰

We need our priest offenders to remind us that God's grace can triumph even in the most evil of circumstances. We need them to prevent us from thinking that the final chapter of any of our lives has been written. We need them, because they challenge us to discover, perhaps for the first time in a personal way, what forgiveness and redemption really mean.

In his work with AIDS-ridden prostitutes in Brazil, James Alison says that he came to understand what Julian of Norwich meant when she affirmed that in heaven our sins will be not shame but glory to us. Of the prostitutes, Alison said:

I hope to know them again in heaven, not so transmogrified that their personal life story has been, in each case, abolished, but rather so utterly alive that their fake beauty, arduously cultivated, their sad personal stories of envy, violence, frustration in love, and their illness have become trophies that are not sources of shame, but which add to their beauty and their joy.¹¹

Each of us in our own way arduously cultivates a fake beauty, sometimes with tragic and even destructive consequences for ourselves and for others. All the more wonderful then, is the triumph of God's love, the power of which, as Paul says, 'is made perfect in weakness'.¹² Our sinfulness is only ever one side of the story. We never have the full picture, not even with regard to ourselves, let alone others. We must allow for the radical depths of incarnate love to take us by surprise, and leave judgement to Christ.

CONCLUSION

On Easter night, in the prayer that celebrates the heart of the Christian mystery, we will most solemnly proclaim *O felix culpa, O necessary sin of Adam, that gained for us so great a redeemer*. God is used to us getting things wrong, individually and institutionally. The Church has a lot of work to do to get things right, to heal the damage done to victims/survivors and to the wider community. Caring for its clergy offenders would only be a small step in the right direction. But it would be an important one in that it would show that the Church has not lost sight of the love and the forgiveness that it is uniquely commissioned to embody.

10. S. Moore (1977), *The Crucified Jesus is no Stranger* (NY: Paulist), p. 4

11. J. Alison (1996), *Living in the End Times. The Last Things Re-imagined* (NY: Crossroad), p. 33.

12. 2 Cor 12:9.