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Author(s): Eamonn Conway

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Touching Our Wounds

Eamonn Conway

These have been harrowing weeks for the Church on both sides of the Atlantic. Grief has displaced Easter glory. The readings of the liturgical season have scarcely been heard over the statements, clarifications and letters of apology from bishops read out over the last number of Sundays. As a Church, we are in a state of grief and of unrecognized mourning. We are experiencing shock, denial, anger, guilt. At the same time, the Easter message is that God is to be found in the darkest and most dismal moment of our personal histories and of our history as a Christian community. There has to be Good News in this awful mess and the Christian community has a responsibility to discern it wisely and proclaim it humbly. This must be done in a way that acknowledges fully the hurt caused to the victims of child sexual abuse, not only by the abusers but also by the institution in its mishandling of cases. Members of the Church feel let down and betrayed; bishops, priests and religious feel vulnerable and wounded. This must also be acknowledged. And regardless of how counter-cultural it may be, the Christian community cannot turn its back on those who have committed the crime of child sexual abuse either. Their sinful and criminal behaviour has resulted from their failure to ground their lives in God's unconditional love. How can we mediate compassion and forgiveness to them?

MUCH HAS BEEN DONE

In the interests of accuracy it has to be acknowledged that much has been done over the last few years, certainly in Ireland, to address child sexual abuse by clergy and religious at least in terms of well-thought-out procedures. Guidelines for reporting cases were introduced in 1996. Last year, the Irish Bishops' Conference commissioned research in association with the Royal College of Surgeons to assess both the nature and the effects of child sexual

Eamonn Conway is a priest of the Archdiocese of Tuam and Head of Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.

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abuse by clergy, the findings of which are due in December of this year. On a different level of human communication, bishops have issued profound and sincere apologies to victims of abuse. They have also offered to meet with victims. Compensation has been paid out in a number of cases. In addition, the Conference of Religious of Ireland has handed over to the State property worth millions of euro in settlement of cases that involved schools and orphanages under their management and which fall under the auspices of a Government commission of enquiry.

Dioceses have initiated a number of renewal programmes for their clergy and have put therapeutic and counselling resources at the disposal of their priests, though clearly this could be done much more systematically. With regard to future priests, seminaries have introduced complex screening processes and have developed extensive human development programmes. As yet, however, there has been no serious consideration of the fact that the traditional seminary might not now be the most appropriate place for the formation of future priests.

I know of no bishop who would still put a child at risk by leaving in ministry or reassigning a priest about whom there was reason for suspicion. In fact, today many priests find themselves in a hellish limbo, priests against whom allegations have been made but not proven, and who, for one reason or another, cannot clear their names. There have also been priests convicted of abuse who have been obligatorily laicized. Sadly, many of these have also been totally abandoned by their former colleagues. The victimization of victimizers brings no solace to victims, and only perpetuates the very cycle that it seeks to disrupt.

WHY HAS NOT ENOUGH BEEN DONE?

Much has been done to minimize the risk of sexual abuse of children by priests in the future. Not enough has been done, however, to heal the wounds of those who have been abused in the past. This has become clear to us in the past few weeks and it will become even clearer in the weeks to come. The Church is only beginning to come to terms with the extent of sexual abuse by priests, with the life-long damage that it has done to victims, and with failure that goes beyond the personal to the institution's culpability, with wide-reaching implications for urgently needed institutional reform. The failure of Church authorities to deal with abuse has compounded the abuse. Why has not more been done and sooner?

It is important to understand the unenviable position in which bishops have found themselves. While they have a solemn duty of care to all their flock, they also have a particular duty of care to

their priests. The relationship between a bishop and his priest is not simply that of an employer and his employees. The bishop is intended to be like a father. When a priest is accused of doing something wrong it is understandable that his bishop would feel defensive, just as a parent would, when confronted with the wrongdoings of his or her child.

Add to this the role played by legal counsel. Victims of abuse have gone the legal route often as the last resort in an effort to be heard and to receive formal acknowledgement of the crime that was committed against them. But put yourself in the place of a bishop who receives a solicitor's letter making allegations against one of his priests. He is already hoping against hope that the allegations are untrue. He is probably feeling profoundly vulnerable regarding his own responsibility. Is it not understandable that he would seek legal advice? This advice would undoubtedly underline the right to the presumption of innocence, and urge caution with regard to whatever is said or put in writing.

Faced with cameras and microphones, an environment which is alien to them and one in which they are clearly not in control, is it not understandable that bishops would also listen to those trained in 'handling' the media, especially if they have painful memories of being misunderstood or quoted out of context in the past, and if the present context is clearly hostile? The relative absence of bishops from our airwaves over the last few weeks is inexcusable, but understandable given their lack of expertise. What is neither excusable nor understandable is the absence of trained and experienced personnel who can speak with the authority of the bishops' conference, who have built up good working relationships with the media and who treat the media's legitimate requests with respect.

There is another aspect to this which must be stated in the interests of fairness, and this is something that the media do not seem to appreciate. Often in the past settlements with victims were reached where confidentiality was not only desired by the institutional Church but also by the victims. Victims were satisfied when priests were removed from active ministry and culpability was admitted through financial settlement. Many victims do not want it to be known that they were sexually abused and bishops have not felt free to disclose information that might reveal their identity, and certainly not to the media. This accounts for some, though not all, of the apparent 'fudging' that has surrounded discussion of whether files, or only some of the information contained in them, will be handed over to the various enquiries.

In all of this the truly Christian response might be for the bishop to leave the security of his office, his spokesmen and legal team,

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and go in search both of the victim and offender; to do precisely that which appears foolish to the eyes of the spin-doctors; to listen, expose himself to the hurt and anger, the anguish and fear whether of victim, priest or parish community. But there are few among us who are so self-assured in the love of Christ and the power of the Good News that we would willingly do that.

Remember that we priests have had years of formation into a clerical caste that holds caution to be the most prized of virtues and that has often advanced us in our clerical careers precisely because we are cautious. Remember that we have been taught to put the institution first and to carry the burden of the institution on our shoulders. In the Church system as we have it today, the bishop, alone, carries responsibility for whatever decisions he makes. If he has the counsel of others, it is often under a veil of secrecy and they can neither defend nor support his decision in public. One assumes, too, that he decides without the support of a feminine presence in his life, a presence that can often see a more embracing and inclusive picture.

WHAT VICTIMS HEAR

The result is that victims of abuse have heard more than words of apology. They have also heard caution, hesitation, silence, secrecy and avoidance. They are not convinced of the human honesty of the words they hear. We are dealing with a profound betrayal of trust, a grievous violation of the most vulnerable. Sexuality, that is meant to embody love, has been abused to overpower and diminish. Something has been stolen which can never be given back. Any hesitation, any hiding behind the text, is heard much more loudly than the words on the page.

Victims of child sexual abuse at the hands of clergy generally do not want to destroy the Church. What they seek, for the most part, is sincere contrition. They want to hear words of apology that flow from a change of heart. Many victims of abuse recognize a painful paradox. The Church that has grievously hurt them is at the same time the only body that can bear the healing love they most need to experience. Victims will draw some consolation if their own pain has helped the Church to become the embodiment of God's love that it is meant to be.

IMMEDIATE STEPS

So what would a conversion of heart look like for the Church at this painful moment in its history? What is the Church called to today, from Ferns to Boston, Poznan to Palm Beach?

First and foremost it is called to take the hurt, bitterness and pain of victims seriously. In this regard, the state has moved in, at

least with regard to the diocese of Ferns. Church authorities have now no choice but to co-operate fully with the public enquiry to be established by George Bermingham and to hand over all files. The bishops must now trust that those appointed by the state will discern what should and should not be disclosed. The same must happen with regard to the internal national audit.

Nothing can result from attempting to withhold information except further damage to the Church's credibility. It is far better that the truth emerges from thorough and balanced investigation than piecemeal and in response to a media frenzy. At the same time we have to bear in mind that the truth is more than simply the revelation of factual information. The whole truth includes much that is of little interest to the media and which in the short term is likely to be eclipsed, such as the countless hours that priests, religious and bishops have spent in healing victims of sexual abuse. Admittedly, none of this can justify or compensate for the hurt and the suffering caused by a tiny minority.

Conversion of heart also requires bishops to meet with victims of abuse, on the victims' terms. We often say to people that we are prepared to hear them out, to listen to painful things that they have to say to us, but the way we construct the meeting effectively blocks them or us from hearing what needs to be heard. Victim support groups, as well as individual victims, should be approached by bishops and given an opportunity to speak fully and freely.

Where and when it is possible – and taking care that this is entirely appropriate from the point of view of victims and accords totally with their wishes – encounters should be facilitated which enable victims to speak directly to their abusers of the damage and hurt that has been caused to them. This also affords offenders an opportunity to admit responsibility and seek forgiveness. Where these encounters have already taken place, they have brought healing and closure both to victim and abuser in a way that no legal process can. This courageous if rare road of reconciliation goes beyond any of the externals of a 'peace process'.

In the immediate future the Church must also put in place a programme of care and support for priests who have been convicted of abuse and have served their sentences, as well as for those who have been removed from active ministry because of child sexual abuse and against whom criminal cases are not proceeding for one reason or another. Sooner or later, the media spotlight will focus on these people. The Church should act towards them on the basis of the Gospel, not media attention. The Church should model compassion, healing and rehabilitation and not merely reflect the repulsion that society as a whole feels towards sexual offenders.

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The Church must also become entirely professional in terms of its dealings with public bodies and with the media, and this needs to happen straight away. The Church in Ireland is reaping the harvest of its failure to educate and empower the laity, and it is little wonder that many of our most talented laity are now reluctant to come to the aid of an institution that has shown little regard for their gifts and expertise. The dragging of feet with regard to the establishment of pastoral councils has left the Church sadly weakened in this difficult moment. Power and authority at all levels need to be shared, and much can be done in this regard even within the existing provisions of Canon Law. Theologians, especially lay theologians, also need to have their talents and gifts acknowledged and utilised. In the last few weeks much has been written in the media about the nature of the Church that is unbalanced, inaccurate and easily refuted, but it has for the most part been allowed to go unchallenged. One example of this is the glib way in which there has been an attempt to connect celibacy with sexual abuse. That this kind of kneejerk journalism goes unchecked is not good enough.

LONGER-TERM IMPLICATIONS

These are some of the steps that need to be taken in the short term. As soon as the immediate trauma is over, the institution must stand back and look at wider and more far-reaching implications, and it is to these I wish to turn now. There is no going back from this crisis to 'business as usual'.

Conversion of heart requires creating a climate of openness and support in our Church where priests and seminarians who have difficulties with their sexuality and sexual maturity can come forward and seek help. The fact that priests, and indeed many of the faithful, continue to live in fear and darkness with regard to their sexuality, that many live painful, lonely and hidden lives, is a sign that the Church is still far from the kingdom. Change always begins with self-acceptance. How can we help priests to accept and acknowledge their sexuality and deal with problems in a mature way?

However, focusing on individuals is not enough. We must also examine the institution as a whole. It cannot be denied that in more cases than we would like to admit, the sexual abuse of children is closely linked to the abuse of power. The maintenance of structures that have vested so much power in some while leaving others in a paralyzing and frustrating powerlessness, needs honest recognition.

It must now be apparent that the perpetuation of an exclusively male monarchical celibate leadership is crippling the

mission of the Church. Much of our current pain has been caused by a model of priesthood in which individuals are presented as sacred personages with sacred powers. The priest was understood to represent in his person the perfect body of Christ. This meant that he had to be totally flawless, all weakness and failure banished and kept from sight. The faithful wanted this, and we priests, for the most part, bought into it, revelling in the unearned status that it brought. Some priests actually came to believe that they could do nothing wrong. Chillingly, victims have recounted how their clerical abusers tried to reassure them that what they were doing could not be harmful because they were priests.

This understanding of priesthood is now clearly bankrupt, and has been for some time. Both people and priests are suffering as a result. None of us alone can represent the fullness of humanity to which Jesus Christ calls us. Becoming human and overcoming what is less than human in our lives is a life-long process only achievable in a community in which many different gifts are lived and shared for the benefit of all. It is the Church that represents the full humanity of the body of Christ, not the priest or the bishop, and no one individual is the Church.

This is a particularly painful time for priests and bishops, and they need a lot of support. Many of them have identified totally with the institution, sublimating their personal identity into that of their external and social role. It is Good News that this destructive model of Church leadership is crumbling, but we have a very serious duty of care to the bishops, priests and religious who have spent their lives in its service.

SHOULD BISHOPS RESIGN?

Bishops have resigned because of their alleged mishandling of child abuse cases. There have been calls for further resignations. It is understandable, and I imagine if a bishop thought for one moment that his resignation would genuinely bring about healing for victims, he would go.

Resignation in itself could be counterproductive. As victims in the Ferns diocese have pointed out, there is the danger that when a head rolls, questions may cease to be asked. In-depth consideration of the organization or the structures is avoided. Scalphunting and scapegoating are primitive ways of dealing with conflict and failure. The world is not divided into the pure and the impure. It is far more important for people to recognize their failures, learn from them and integrate what they have learned into the service of others.

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CONCLUSION

This Easter, our faith has been seriously ruptured. I am not sure that we fully realize yet just quite how much. I return to the fact that we are in a process of grief and mourning, the first stage of which is denial. There is a danger that we will settle for short-term crisis management. But what is needed is leadership. When and where do our Church leaders, in the eye of this storm, have the chance to get beyond management talk? When and where can they admit their sense of pain and impotence – as indeed Cardinal Desmond Connell did in an unplanned but transparently real moment at the end of the Maynooth press conference on 8 April? When and where can bishops listen and pray about this without the pressure of having to make a public statement? People in mourning seldom realize the pressures they are experiencing. They fuss about the sandwiches for the funeral but their feelings get little invitation to come forth. They receive and contribute well-meant platitudes about a ‘great loss’ when in fact they need another space and quality of presence. Delayed or avoided mourning is an unhealthy spiritual situation.

This Easter, the Risen Lord is inviting all of us to another level, unknown to the media experts, or the lawyers, but the only wavelength worthy of the pain of the victims and our pain, and indeed of our faith. We must take time to let the pain and the darkness come upon us:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.

—T. S. Eliot

The pain recognized but unvoiced is of pastoral failure. But beyond the pain and shame of abuse is the other dark shadow of fearing that at this key moment in the history of the Irish people we might fail the treasure of faith. Could it be irreparably damaged, or even lost because of our incapacities in the turmoil of now? This Easter we all need to listen and speak more gently and deeply, more prayerfully and more in touch with our wounds and the wounds of all concerned. It is only then that we can hope that once again Easter glory will fill our skies.