

“The truth will set you free”

Introduction

The revelations of the last few days, culminating in the extraordinary meeting of the Bishops' Conference in Maynooth in April, have been a blizzard experience for the people of the Church, priests and laity alike. It is important, however, to note that the scandal is not that child sexual abuse by clergy or religious has taken place, given that such abuse was truly exposed in the early 1990s; it is, rather, the apparent failure of the institutional Church to respond adequately to complaints of abuse, and, in particular, to respond adequately to those who experienced abuse. In this article, then, I want to focus on a number of elements: those who have experienced abuse by clergy or religious, the clergy themselves, the role of the media in reporting on the whole issue, and moving forward from our current position.

Identifying the needs

The most immediate objective facing the Church is to assist in the healing of those who have experienced abuse. I believe it was impossible to listen to people like Colm O'Gorman or Pat Jackman on television or radio in recent days without being moved by their statements and in awe of their balanced approach to the Church. Despite the direct experience of grave wrong, both of these men were able to make a distinction between the specific perpetrators of abuse and the general membership of the clergy, something that some media commentators and sources appear unable or unwilling to do.

The primary task for the institutional Church, as defined by those who have suffered, is to state the truth; and they mean quite categorically that it should be the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Episcopal recourse to legal advice, whether canonical or civil, has clearly not always been an encouragement toward the whole truth. It is imperative that the necessary details be provided, that the whole issue emerges into the clear light of day. Cardinal Connell has provided a model response to the issue in this regard: his office indicated the number of allegations of child sexual abuse it had referred to the civil authorities and at what date. It is important to note here, however, that some bishops have found themselves unable to act on complaints because they were anonymous, or sometimes constrained by the wishes of the complainant for confidentiality. While the desire to protect such confidences is admirable, it cannot become an excuse for failing to act in a manner that protects children and responds appropriately to those whose lives have been affected.

Consequent on the ownership of the issue, by facing the complete truth about child sexual abuse in public, it clearly follows that the institutional Church must provide some form of restorative justice to those who suffered abuse as well as taking steps to ensure that those who perpetrated abuse cannot do so again. The task of restorative justice can take several different forms, such as monetary compensation and / or payment for the provision of therapeutic interventions, but that is a debate for another day. The question of healing will not be solved so quickly. It might be useful to note in passing, however, that the model used by the Laffoy Commission and the compensation tribunal, which give an active role to those who have experienced abuse, is a critical dimension to moving on. The institutional Church cannot deal with this issue without listening to, and involving, those affected.

Responding on a wider front

It is important to acknowledge the secondary and tertiary victims of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious, viz., the families of all involved, the colleagues and the parish communities as well as the wider faith community. The Bishops' Conference has already begun to make some effort to address this dimension of the problem by commissioning a study by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, the results of which will be published in early 2003. Such an initiative is an important step in understanding the extent and effect of the problem in Ireland. We also have a great deal of information from the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland study, commissioned by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and carried out by the RCSI, which sets some of the issues in a national context.

What of those who have perpetrated child sexual abuse? These are clearly in need of help and support. Bishops have a particular relationship towards their presbyterates, and there can clearly be a conflict between the bishop's task to serve the wider church and his concern for a specific individual. It should be quite evident by now, however, that the concern for an individual cannot be expressed in a way that is damaging to the wider church, such as by means of repeated transfer, or non-compliance with civil requests or other forms of obfuscation. The concern for the individual priest or religious must not be allowed to outweigh the needs of those who have suffered abuse, as has happened all too often in the past.

The clergy

Care for the presbyterate is also required in a new and urgent fashion given the way so many priests feel in the wake of child sexual abuse revelations, as the very life-choice of priests and religious is called into question. We preachers of the gospel are also sinners, earthen vessels which are the bearers of God's treasure. Sinners all, we have given our lives as best we could to the service of the gospel. In the words of one Jesuit, 'we live often as men foolish, our eyes fixed on a star mocked by others'.

Many priests find themselves isolated at this time. Parishioners have expressed great reserve about priests and priesthood. A bond of trust has been further damaged by what has come to light. The net result is that some priests are now experiencing a deep and abiding loneliness, increased frustration, and a deepening hopelessness about the future of the institutional Church to which they have given their lives. The lack of a corporate support structure is keenly felt.

This is a question to which the bishops must address themselves with great urgency. At a time of crisis in the Church, perhaps one of the things that is needed is a rediscovery of priestly fraternity, not as a cosy clerical club but as a necessary element in human growth. I do not believe that we priests can survive without intimacy in our lives. I continue to believe that the only hope of dealing effectively with the challenge and privation of celibacy is to have close friends, both lay and clerical, with whom we can share hopes and dreams and fears and failures, as well as being accountable to them for our lifestyles. To pretend that perfect celibacy is an idyllic life of unfettered grace is to be seriously self-deluded. But celibacy is not the problem; child abuse is a dysfunction of status, power and self esteem. If celibacy were the issue, then the abuse revealed in the Mormon and Anglican churches, as

well as many Protestant communions with married clergy, would not exist, not to mention abuse by fathers and grandfathers.

Media commentary and press agency

In this regard, the media content of recent days is worthy of examination. In commenting on the media coverage, some priest friends have complained bitterly. Typical amongst their responses are phrases like ‘the whole focus is on clergy abusers; don’t they realise that abuse exists right across society’; ‘priests are no more likely to abuse than any other group; why doesn’t somebody say that’; ‘you’d swear it was celibacy was the problem – what about abuse by fathers and grandfathers?’ and, increasingly commonly ‘why is there no official spokesperson for the Church on any of these programs?’ While such questions are entirely understandable, they also reflect a certain natural defensiveness in the face of media coverage.

The Irish nation is generally well served by the high quality of journalism found in most broadsheet newspapers, radio, and television, although some distinction is to be made between those radio and television programmes which actually allow genuine debate of the issues (Morning Ireland, Questions and Answers, Five-Seven Live, PrimeTime) and those which adopt a more ‘come one, come all’ approach one which is driven essentially by populist demand (The Late Late Show, The Marian Finucane Show, Today with Pat Kenny, and Liveline). These media are usually seen as reliable and trustworthy; their coverage of events is a measure of the significance and relative importance of those events to Irish society.

I strongly believe, despite the reservations of some, that the Church has in fact been well served by the media in their relentless pursuit of uncovering child sexual abuse by clergy and religious. That serving has not been pleasant! The media have exposed a virulent horror within the institutional church, the cause of which must be eradicated. The ecclesial community owes the media a great deal but that does not mean that the coverage has been balanced or complete. The lack of informed debate is also a problem, but one often of the institutional Church’s own making. The media have already helped to stimulate a debate and can help further by ensuring that such a debate is full and comprehensive on the issue of child sexual abuse in all sectors of Irish society; in so doing, the media can contribute richly to the public understanding of this phenomenon by reporting on the latest scholarship in this field.

Tabloid media, both in terms of tabloid newspapers and tabloid-type television are something altogether different. Although tabloid tackiness is to be expected, new lows were reached on the coverage of one bishop with the emphasis on his former problems. Sadly such poor quality coverage, together with highly inflammatory language, disingenuous subheadings and misleadingly captioned images, continues to masquerade as journalism and has a large audience. It is these same tabloid sources that have been so negative about other areas in Irish life, and which appear to have no qualms about the consequences of sensational reportage. These same concerns have been documented about the tabloids in relation to other issues, most recently in terms of coverage of refugees and various legal issues.

The tabloid practice of tracking down those who have served their sentences and who are trying to create new lives for themselves is especially reprehensible. Done under a guise of 'informing the public', the lurid language, provocative banner headlines and nasty photo captions make it clear that increased sales is the sole interest of such coverage. Sadly, the result of such sustained coverage will be to drive offenders underground, removed from contact with therapists and family, and therefore all the more likely to re-offend. In so doing, such publications are engaging in a process which will move offenders from place to place, something they have themselves strongly condemned.

Tabloids apart, it is relatively easy to see why there is such a concern about media coverage amongst so many clergy. The overall impression given is unbalanced. The whole issue of child sexual abuse is not one-dimensional, nor is it reserved to the Catholic clergy. To suggest by volume of coverage, or by repetition of the serendipitously alliterative phrase 'paedophile priest', that abuse is solely in the province of the clergy is to do a great disservice to the overwhelming majority of clergy while neglecting the whole question of inter-familial abuse. It would be a mistake, however, to reject the message merely because one dislikes the emphasis or accent of the messenger.

The tendency in some quarters of the media to link homosexuality with paedophilia is also worrisome. It is particularly troubling to see such a link being made within Rome. Joaquim Navarro-Valls reportedly stated that paedophilia within the Church was primarily an issue of homosexual clergy. The strait-jacketed reasoning seemed to run as follows: the ordination of homosexuals is probably invalid; clergy child abusers are all homosexual; such abusers are therefore not validly ordained; ergo, no 'true' priest ever abused a child. Given that Navarro-Valls is a key player in the Vatican press office, is it any surprise that journalists are misguided when the highest press office in the Church can portray such ignorance? Such rampant homophobia perpetuates a falsehood about homosexuals, shifts the focus of the debate from paedophilia to homosexuality, and ignores the primary need of support for those who have suffered abuse. This whole debate is not about protecting the institutional Church and its ministry but about discovering a way to respond adequately, honestly and openly to those who have experienced abuse by some ministers of the Church.

Added to all this is the absence of official spokespersons from many debates. On one radio program on the day of writing, there were journalists from two broadsheets, a tabloid, and an independent religious paper as well as the presenter of the show. This was a case of journalists affirming each other with the resultant emphasis on peripheral issues like the photograph of a known paedophile with the pope, rather than on the core issue of hurt, truth and healing. Whether official spokespersons have simply ducked the issue and run for cover, or whether they have been excluded by the choice of the producers or their masters, one cannot tell. But it is safe to say that the past practice of ostrich imitation, experienced as 'keep your head down and it will all blow over', will not work. The failure to respond to those who have suffered abuse is the scandal of our time and will continue as a festering wound within the Church until addressed and healed.

Edging forward

The function of all the support services of the institutional Church must be the furtherance of the gospel. Insofar as lawyers, canonists and press agents have failed to do this, they have failed the whole Church. The sadness is that much of what has been done by these three groups has been with an eye to protecting the institutional Church and/or clergy without due regard to those who have suffered abuse. It is scrutiny by the media which has made the Church face this catastrophic mistake. We can only hope that future responses will be driven by considerations of pastoral concern rather than by legal protection.

It is good to read that the Bishops' Conference has welcomed Micheal Martin's announcement of an inquiry, and that they have promised full cooperation with George Bermingham. The announcement of an internal audit is also welcome. That said, it seems apparent in the wider Church that a great deal needs to be done, even if that means exposing past mistakes. The greatest failure the Church can experience is not to learn from its past. For this reason a thoroughly independent commission could be established by the Bishops' Conference with the remit of reporting publicly on the extent of child sexual abuse and the way the Church responded, but doing so in a context that looks at the issue in society as a whole. Desmond Tutu, no stranger to suffering, has written of "opening wounds to cleanse them ... to stop them festering; ... (because) you cannot forgive what you do not know." It is vital that this wound be healed lest it destroy us all.

The upcoming report from the RCSI study, commissioned by the Bishops long before the current furore began, will be a significant help. Both the Bishops' Conference and the Conference of Religious in Ireland are to be commended for the guidelines that have been produced. It is the application of these guidelines that now needs to be examined. In this respect the institutional Church is indeed moving to a model of best practice.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that the revelation of abuse within families is always a traumatic and often deeply divisive event. When such inter-familial disclosures are made there can be disbelief, shame, denial, division and rejection. In the family of the Church the experience is no different. But precisely because we are Church, we must move beyond such initial reactions. While these are dark days, we cannot have the luxury of looking to our own suffering. As Donal Murray wrote recently to the clergy of his diocese:

"In spite of, even because of, our pain, we must constantly remind ourselves that what we are suffering in these days bears no comparison to the hurt, the lasting damage, the distress and the sense of betrayal endured by victims of child sexual abuse. We recognise that this betrayal is especially dreadful in those who have been abused by our brother priests. We must treat any victim who may approach us with respect and humble willingness to listen. It is hard to bear the fact that many see the priesthood which we cherish and which we entered with such hope, and see the Church which we serve, as having colluded with or tolerated the abuse of vulnerable children."

The last word comes from an atheist, Albert Camus. After the war Camus gave a talk to a group of Dominicans about the reality of evil in life. Inter alia he stated:

“it may not be possible for us to create a world in which no innocent children suffer; it is possible for us to create a world in which fewer innocent children suffer. If we do that, if we look to the Christians and do not find help, where else will we go?”

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