

## Accusations of Abuse

As accusations of sexual abuse by priests continue to surface, I can't help wondering whether Catholics may be looking for reassurance that the Church and the priesthood aren't crumbling around them and that things are not as desperate as the picture popularly painted by the media.

In an earlier paper that I wrote on this subject<sup>1</sup> I began by saying: "There is no question whatsoever of the basic moral evil underlying all instances of the sexual abuse of children. It is a misuse of power and a betrayal of trust on the part of the abuser and it can result in tremendous long-term psychological harm and damage to the victim. There are no excuses, no mitigating circumstances. Children should be, and must be, completely safe and totally protected, and those who abuse children must be held fully accountable in law." It's important to make that point once again because I wouldn't want anyone to misinterpret what I am saying here, or to think that I am in any way lessening the extreme seriousness of the situation of the sexual abuse of children by priests. Nor would I want in any way to minimise the situation of the victims of abuse.

I think it's also important to repeat another point I made that, statistically, the incidence of abuse by priests is no higher than in the rest of the population, however we tend to hear more about it because it makes better headlines. The point is sadly illustrated by recent stories of the physical and sexual abuse of children by family members, something we find particularly disturbing though, perhaps, for slightly different reasons than abuse by priests. Interestingly people wouldn't criticise the institution of the family despite whatever abuse might occur within its walls, but certain elements will seize on abuse by priests to criticise the institution of the Church and that of priesthood. They will demand the heads of bishops and cardinals, but who do they hold responsible for abuse within families?

Much of what we have been hearing in the media recently has had to do with the mismanagement of priests suspected of sexual activity with children. By and large the abuse itself occurred many years ago at a time when the subject of paedophilia was little understood. It was treated in much the same way as priests were dealt with who had a drink problem. At least with alcoholism a priest could be sent to AA for help and he would typically also be moved to a new parish with the hope of new beginnings all round. It's difficult for us to understand, knowing what we now know, that society in general (and not just the Church) was as woefully ignorant as it was about paedophilia. Hindsight is a great thing. We know now that simply moving an abusing priest was not the

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<sup>1</sup> "If Only We Had Known Better"

answer; we also know now that specialised counselling (even if it had been available) would not have helped - paedophilia can not be cured.

As a consequence of all of this, we are now hearing more and more about the mismanagement of priests suspected of abusing children. If accusations of abuse were made against a priest and those accusations were found to be true, legal process should have followed and the child(ren) involved given appropriate help and support. In practice cases of abuse weren't easy to prove because victims were afraid to tell anyone especially when it involved their priest. But this leads to my next point: why has it taken so long for the current wave of cases to come to light?

I understand and accept the psychological damage and trauma that the experience of sexual abuse can cause and, therefore, how difficult it might be for someone to now bring out into the open past experiences they may have been repressing, or even denying, for so many years. Many of the cases currently coming to light seem to have happened in the 1970s and yet, while some made their abuse known let's say ten or fifteen years ago, others have only been able to come forward more recently - which, of course, is quite understandable. However, one obvious consequence of this is that there seems to be no end to the revelations - they just keep coming, one after another. As a result the damage being caused to the Church and to the priesthood by what is actually a very small proportion of priests and religious is far greater than such a minority ought to be able to cause. It's almost like the after-shocks of an earthquake which often cause far more damage than the initial quake did.

We had the scandal of priest-abusers here in England, but then, eventually, things settled down and we hoped we could move on. But then cases came to light in a number of American dioceses. While the far-reaching effects of those scandals may have been far from resolved, things at least began to settle down. But then it was England once again, and then Ireland, and then Germany. It seems like every time things begin to settle and people start getting over their outrage, and the priesthood begins to emerge from the shadow that each case casts, along comes another wave and another and so it goes on. You can't help wondering who or what is behind so well "coordinated" a process.

I am quite convinced that it proves the devil to be alive and well and is well-served by this situation. Even when there is a case to be answered by individuals within a local Church, the situation is doing untold and (in terms of the larger picture) undeserved damage to the wider Church. Yes the Church has to be accountable for what has been going on, but, as I have said, the past actions of what is, again, a small minority of priests should never be allowed to cause so much potential damage.

**A**t the same time the priesthood doesn't deserve to be under the constant attack it is currently under as a result of the, albeit horrendous, actions of that same minority. From a personal point of view it makes me very angry that they have caused (and continue to cause) so many problems for the rest of us who are simply trying to get on with our ministry. I know of colleagues who have been called (not accused, but called) child abusers simply because they are priests. Why should we have to keep defending and justifying ourselves and our ministry? – and we do have to, that is our experience, guilty until proved innocent, and all because of the actions of a few bad apples.

**I**n light of how long ago some of the cases of abuse took place, the question has been raised as to whether there should be a “statute of limitations”.

**F**irst of all there are grounds for concern regarding the reliability of memory with the passage of time. It could be argued that the trauma resulting from abuse may have etched that experience into the memory but, by the same token, if someone has actively repressed the experience over the years, how reliable is whatever remains of those memories? There is also the possibility of false memories created by the imagination or resulting from what a person may have heard or read. The more time that passes, the more risk there is that such factors could have an influence. These things are not easily proved or disproved and what would help is for accusations to be made as soon as possible after the event while the memories are more immediate and therefore more reliable. That might be possible in an ideal world, but if it were an ideal world there wouldn't have been any abuse in the first place.

**S**econdly, and returning to the question of why it has taken some victims of abuse twenty or thirty years to come forward, the situation isn't helped by a recent newspaper report which stated that the victim “only complained about the abuse after hearing that another victim had won compensation”. Sadly it's our pervading compensation culture that causes people to wonder. At first it seemed that victims were satisfied simply to see the perpetrators of abuse brought to book and therefore also preventing others from being abused. But more recent cases seem to have multi-million pound (or dollar) compensation claims attached to them and, typically, dioceses are not in a financial position to survive such claims. And whether they are or whether they aren't, ultimately it will be the people of those dioceses (not the abusers) who, directly or indirectly, will have to bear the financial cost of the claims being made.

**A**nother time-related concern has to do with accusations of physical, as opposed to sexual, abuse.

**T**he way in which children are disciplined has changed considerably over the course of the last twenty or thirty years, in fact there seems to be very little

discipline at all anymore and maybe that accounts for some of problems we see and experience in our society. Even though the ways in which children used to be disciplined (especially in institutions – and Borstal would be a prime example) would not be acceptable today, it seems unjust and unfair for people to be able bring prosecutions now on the basis of how they were treated twenty or thirty years ago. At the same time an important distinction should be made between acceptable and commonly practised methods of punishment at that time, and actions and practices that were clearly physically or mentally abusive for which, where possible, the perpetrators should be held to account.

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There is very little the Church can do to make up for incidents of abuse in the past or for its failure to deal with abusers the way they should have been dealt with had we have known better. However the Church can ensure that if an abuser still in post is discovered, they are immediately and unconditionally removed from their ministry and held to account in law for their actions. Hopefully adequate systems are now in place (in our seminaries and afterwards) to safeguard children and vulnerable adults against physical or sexual abuse - by anyone involved in the Church, not just priests - and to indentify the first signs of deviant behaviour on the part of individuals who, despite everything, may still have managed to slip through the safeguarding net. All that even CRB clearance says is that a possible problem hasn't been discovered yet, therefore because there is never a one hundred percent guarantee, there must never be less than one hundred per cent vigilance. And all of these policies and practices and requirements should, of course, be the same in the Church and in society in general, first of all because the problem isn't unique to the Church, but also because, while at one time we may not have known better, now we do.

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