

## **If Only We Had Known Better**

**W**hen the scandal of the sexual abuse of minors by priests was at its height some years ago, I wrote the original version of this hand-out by way of explanation and reassurance for parishioners given that the approach taken by the media wasn't always balanced or well-informed. I have revisited this paper on at least two occasions since then in light of the on-going recurrence of this sad subject. As a priest it wasn't an easy thing to write about (and still isn't) because most of us were feeling somewhat battered and bruised by what was going on. Increasingly we felt as if we had to defend and justify ourselves and our ministry as priests. Some priests even found themselves the object of verbal abuse in the street from people branding all clergy as child abusers.

**T**here 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. I make these points right at the start because I don't want anyone to misinterpret what I am going to say, or to think that I am in any way lessening the extreme seriousness of the situation of child abuse, in particular on the part of priests.

**I** had been looking once again at two books that I had read on the subject of child sexual abuse, books that were considered expert presentations on the subject and that were published as recently as the early 1990s. Both of them went in the bin shortly after I re-read parts of them. I couldn't believe how out-dated they had become in so short a space of time and how wrong they now were in some of the recommendations they made at the time. For me this confirms just how ignorant we were as a society on the subject of paedophilia and how much we have learned and how much our approach has had to change in just the last few years.

**T**his ignorance, this not knowing, is what I feel has been responsible for the mismanagement of priest-abusers in the past, even the recent past. The better of the two books likened the situation to that of alcoholism among the clergy in terms of how it was typically dealt with. At one time, if a priest had a drink problem, the people of his parish may well have made allowances, but if it became too obvious a problem, or if it was brought to the attention of his bishop, he would probably have been spoken to very strongly by the powers-that-be and told to shape up and then, if he didn't, he would have been moved to another parish where his problem wasn't known. Typically there was a reluctance to deal with the problem head-on because of an over-riding wish to protect the reputation of the priest, to avoid any more

scandal than had already been given and to safeguard the image of the priesthood. It wasn't realised at the time that alcoholism is an illness for which there is no cure – an alcoholic is always an alcoholic and the only positive course of action is for the person to give up drinking completely and, of course, to seek help and support through an organisation such as 'Alcoholics Anonymous'.

Until very recently – until, in fact, we suddenly woke up to the reality of the situation – a priest suspected of having a questionable or inappropriate relationship with a child was treated in much the same way as a priest with a drink problem used to be. Initially there would probably have been a degree of secrecy to overcome because the child would have been too afraid to say anything or maybe didn't realise that what was happening to them was wrong because they trusted the priest. Those who may have had their suspicions would typically have come up with other explanations first, giving the priest the benefit of the doubt, because the reality was too shocking to contemplate. Only, perhaps, after a considerable amount of time had passed would it have been impossible to continue denying the situation and something would finally have been said. Being only human himself, the bishop concerned would probably have preferred not to think the unthinkable, but if the situation was beyond doubt then all he could do was talk to the priest, recommend he talk to his confessor, and then reassign him to a parish far away in the hope that there wouldn't be the same temptations to which he had given way before.

Tragically that was where the ignorance of the time, the not knowing, came in. Like everyone else, bishops simply had no idea about the pathology of paedophilia or that, like alcoholism, it is an illness - in this case a mental illness - that isn't going to go away and that can't be cured. Nor was it realistic to expect an abusing priest to stay away from children simply by sending him somewhere where children weren't immediately accessible. However now we do know, but until relatively recently we didn't.

We can't for a moment deny, or ignore, the effects that past abuse has had on someone as a child, and their needs must now be acknowledged and addressed. But some of the accusations that have been levelled at Church leaders and religious Orders have to be seen within the context of what was known at the time. How long ago did the abuse take place? When was it brought to the attention of the authorities and were the decisions that were made subject to the same lack of knowledge that we as a society shared at the time? No one can excuse the judgment and action of someone who should have known better, but by the same token we can't look back with hindsight and condemn someone for not acting according to knowledge they simply wouldn't have had at the time – and through no fault of their own.

It also seems unjust for people to be accused now of acts of physical abuse relating to actions that took place at a time when physical chastisement and discipline were widely accepted and applied in society. Where such acts were excessive and truly abusive, then individuals should, of course, be held accountable, but if they were merely doing what was acceptable practice at the time, it seems unjust to bring a case against them twenty or thirty years later in a day and age when what is acceptable, discipline-wise, has radically changed. This argument cannot, of course, be applied to cases of sexual abuse.

As far as the grim picture of the clergy currently being given is concerned, it has to be said that the incidence of sexual abuse by priests is actually no greater than in the general population (all too often a family member, as we have seen in recent high profile cases), but this isn't usually emphasised by the media because abuse by clergy makes a much better story. There was, for example, an individual connected with a certain police authority who was prosecuted for child abuse. It received a half front-page coverage. Two days later the same paper carried the story of a priest accused of abuse and it was given, again, half of the front page but also a full inside page of four articles, a half-page commentary, and was also the subject of an editorial.

The media is also fond of suggesting that celibacy may be the root cause of priests becoming child abusers, a choice for celibacy seeming a little bit odd to them. As a matter of general principle celibacy doesn't, in fact, seem to be at the root of the problem given that, tragically, a great deal of the abuse that we don't hear about takes place within families and is carried out by people who are not in fact celibate. Nor is the sexual abuse of children unique to clergy of the Catholic Church.

What should be said is that people have a right to expect better of their priests, a higher moral standard, and that the trust they place in their clergy should be well-founded. In the vast majority of cases – and that is the important point to remember – this will be so, even though priests are only human and have faults and shortcomings just like everyone else. That said, sexual abuse is something that can, and will, no longer be covered up or excused. If we had known better we would surely have done better, and now that we do we will.

All sorts of safeguards are now in place. Every parish is required to sign up to and support their diocese's policy statement and to have a "Safeguarding"<sup>1</sup> Coordinator to oversee the application of that policy. Everyone who works with children and vulnerable adults is now required to have a Criminal Records Bureau background check. Even then, all a clear CRB check shows is that the person hasn't been caught, so even it isn't foolproof in terms of the guarantee it offers, but for now it

---

<sup>1</sup> formerly "Child Protection"

is, perhaps, the best we can do. We clergy had no choice but to submit immediately to the system of CRB clearance and yet it has been interesting to hear the outrage of lay people wanting to work with children and newly introduced to the requirement, objecting to being made to feel guilty until they are proved innocent. That's how we priests have felt for a long time now as the priesthood continues to be put on trial by the media. Yes there have been some bad apples in the barrel, but no more so than in society in general, and they were only a small minority (again as in society in general).

The "down side" to the situation is that we priests are at a point of paranoia in our contact with children (even my use of the word "contact" could be misunderstood - that's how paranoid we have become). We are advised to avoid even the most harmless physical contact with children; we are wary of being alone in a sacristy with an altar server; and we must constantly second-guess every situation we are in that involves children. From a pastoral point of view, none of this helps a child to experience their priest as being friendly and welcoming but, unfortunately, that's how things have to be these days. We are even required to ensure our confessional doors are fitted with a window now so we don't create a situation of compromise or risk for the penitent (child or adult) or for ourselves.

While the tragic reality of child abuse by clergy cannot be ignored, I think it's important to have a balanced perspective with respect to the vast majority of priests who are doing everything that their people expect of them spiritually and pastorally and in no way deserve to be tarred with the same brush as those found guilty of abuse. However, as long as new cases come to light (and many are actually old cases from a time when we didn't know what we know now), it is difficult for priests not to feel that we and our ministry continue to be under a microscope. One way or another it puts that much more pressure on our ministry in an age when there is pressure enough already. And of course, in such a climate, sadly there is little wonder that young people, seeing what they see in the media about priesthood, and not always hearing a voice in support of it, decide that it's no way of life for them. I will always remember the occasion when, at the end of a diocesan celebration at the Cathedral in Middlesbrough, the late Bishop O'Brien spontaneously spoke in support of the priests of the diocese. His words, and the priests who were present, received a very moving and prolonged ovation from a packed congregation. It was just what we needed at the time and it's probably just we need again now.

\* \* \*

Fr Neil McNicholas