

On scandal and scandals

Brendan Callaghan SJ

Recent headlines about clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church have focused largely on the way in which the Church has handled claims of abuse and on the postulated link between abuse and mandatory celibacy for Catholic priests. Psychologist Brendan Callaghan SJ looks closely at these aspects of a tragic situation, asking how the Church has arrived at a place of such suffering, betrayal and anger.

That even one child has been abused by a priest is cause for justifiable anger, as Archbishop Vincent Nichols stated in a television interview last Palm Sunday. No-one with any knowledge of the harm done by clergy sexual abuse could possibly disagree with him. Those who have direct experience – those who have been abused – know this; those whose experience is less direct – those with personal and/or professional relationships with people who have been abused – learn this. I write as someone in the latter group, as a Jesuit, psychologist, and friend: with the experience that comes from Jesuit safeguarding responsibilities, with the experience of a psychologist who has worked with both abused and abusers, but, much more importantly, with the experience of love for and friendship with people who have been abused as well as with others who also love them and care about them.

The emotional damage of any sexual abuse can be massive, and one dimension of that damage is usually the profound experience of betrayal. It is a commonplace to point to clergy sexual abuse as a case in point: a priest occupies a position of particular trust, and it is that particular trust which has been betrayed. That is an unquestionable truth, but we need to hold alongside it another appalling truth: the great majority of cases of abuse occur within the setting where the child should feel most secure and most able to trust, namely the family.



There is no place for a calculus of horror, attempting to suggest that one type of experience of betrayal and abuse is by its nature worse than another. But there is a place for perspective and context, so that our responses to any abuse can be both motivated by our anger and compassion and guided by informed and intelligent reflection. In search of such perspective and context, it is worth exploring two aspects of what has been said in various media about clerical child sexual abuse: mandatory celibacy

and a ‘conspiracy of silence’. A brief look at each can lead us into a broader reflection on what has contributed to the Church finding itself in this place of tragedy, suffering, sin and failure.

Mandatory celibacy

A number of recent articles and broadcasts have linked clergy sexual abuse directly with the (Latin) Catholic discipline of mandatory celibacy. ‘Do away with mandatory celibacy for Roman Catholic priests and you take away one of the prime causes of abuse.’ Such an idea appears persuasive: sexuality is a powerful dimension of our human experience. Our culture runs the risk of so elevating directly sexual experience (in the narrower sense of ‘sexual’, that is, in terms of sexual intercourse) that we lose sight of the possibility of being a sexual person (in the wider sense of ‘sexual’, that is, including all the affective elements of our humanity), and of living a healthy and fulfilled life, as a celibate.

Two quite distinct sets of data make clear that there is no such direct link between mandatory celibacy and child sexual abuse. The first has already been referred to: in terms of the risk of sexual abuse, the most dangerous place for a child is their own home, and the most dangerous people are not intruders or strangers, but family and friends. The second is that in terms of the incidence of sexual abuse, a child is at no greater risk in the setting of the Roman Catholic Church than in any other setting where adults have unsupervised access to children.

If, as you read that last sentence, you found yourself reacting with anger, protesting that that is not the point, that any level of incidence is unacceptable in the setting of the Church, then be aware that my experience in typing that sentence matches yours in reading it. With Archbishop Nichols, I agree that for even one child to be abused is a cause for justifiable anger. But to understand what is involved, so that we can both protect children and see justice done, we need to be able to face and deal with facts that disturb us.

Child sexual abuse takes place not only across a wide range of settings within our own culture, but also across cultures. Nor is child sexual abuse a feature of our own time: children have suffered sexual abuse across the centuries, as penal and religious codes, among other sources, make all too clear. But there is a growing willingness to recognise these facts as facts: unwelcome facts, unpalatable facts, but facts none the less. This openness is a necessary positive step, and it is now becoming more evident in the structures of the Church.

A conspiracy of silence

Psychotherapists and members of all the professions involving intensive work with clients grow to recognise the phenomenon called ‘parallel processing’, where some aspect of the client’s pathology plays itself out among those concerned with the client – in a case conference, for example, or in the therapist’s own supervision session. So, given that denial is so central in the psychodynamics of both abuser and abused, it is not surprising that denial is such a powerful mechanism at work among those dealing with child sexual abuse.

The reality – that sexual behaviour between an adult and a child is an abusive exercise of power rather than a

mutual expression of love – is rarely if ever acknowledged by the abuser. But the abuser will also make use of the power that they have to ensure the silence of the abused child, whether this be by the threat of direct violence, or by the threat of the blame being put on the child, or whatever.

The emotional survival of the abused child seems to depend typically on not admitting into conscious awareness the reality of what has been done to them, whether this takes the form of completely editing-out (repressing) any memory of the events, of diminishing the impact and significance of what has occurred, or of accepting a responsibility that can never actually be theirs.

Denial is at the heart of abuse. If psychology professionals find themselves caught up in parallel processing, then the deadly ways in which denial has been at the heart of responses to clergy sexual abuse are less surprising.

Putting this more colloquially: we don’t like to think about child sexual abuse, and so we take what opportunities there are *not* to think about it. And if we are forced to confront it, we maintain as much distance as possible by labelling abusers in ways that make them appear as distant as possible from us and from ‘people like us’. The tabloid headlines simply spell out in 50-point type the manoeuvres most of us engage in at some point.

Once again, to begin to understand is not to excuse. Denial allows us to cope, whether we are parents: ‘Never say that about one of God’s priests!’ – fellow-clergy: ‘That can’t be true of Fr X!’ – or bishops: ‘Father has recognised his sinfulness and weakness, and has accepted the need for counselling: he deserves a new start!’.

But to maintain denial in face of the facts costs effort, and increasing levels of determination, and both diminish our capacity to face any truth. The ethos within which professional therapists function enables them to recognise parallel processing at work – in the form of denial or any other form – and to make use of what it tells them about both the dynamics of the particular case and the dynamics that are typical of themselves as therapists. Recognising these perhaps difficult truths, and assisted in such recognition by the

shared insights and the working structures of their community of professionals, a therapist can move on, becoming of greater service in the future.

Community and Failure

This is not to suggest that therapists and other communities of professionals are rendered immune by their shared insights and working structures, however well these may have been worked out. The truth, as any social worker could tell us, is that children subjected to abuse have been failed by state and voluntary sector organisations that had the duty to protect them, and that the role of the media has been less than consistent. But it seems to me that the response of ‘the Church’ to reports of child sexual abuse points to ways in which the shared insights and working structures of the church community have frequently been a hindrance rather than a help.

Turning to consider wider aspects of how we live as Church might seem to run the risk of turning away from what has to be central. The great tragedy, of which we must not lose sight, is that so much suffering has been inflicted that could have been avoided: the faces of this tragedy are always the faces of the hurt and betrayed children.

What we as members of the Church have to confront is that the hurt and betrayal are consequences of the failures of our community to live fully as a gospel community. To the measure that we take seriously the insight that we as Church are the gathered people of God, with a common responsibility for each other and for the community, then to that measure we have to accept that the failure is a shared failure. Such a statement may prompt a variety of responses, but I want to suggest that we as Church are being offered an opportunity of grace, and that like all such opportunities of grace, we need to recognise not only what is being offered, but what is being asked of us so that we can receive what is being offered.

I think that what is being asked of us is to move away from a clericalist culture which has developed into something out of step with the truth of the Church, and to regain a lived experience of the reality of the Church as a Christ-centred community in which different people have different ministries of service. At its best the Church has embodied that reality, both in

vivid, highly visible ways and in quiet everyday ways. To suggest that we are being invited by the Spirit to move is not to ignore or to discount the Gospel-centred lives of so many men and women called to ministry and leadership in the Church. But like any institution, the Church does not always live at its best, and when it does not, it can manifest a closed defensiveness that reduces both its capacity to be a witness to the Good News revealed in Jesus and its ability to hear and see the truth.

A defensive institutional culture

It is a truism to say that the Church has struggled across five centuries with this defensive way of living. Responses to the challenges of the Reformation shifted from dialogue and self-examination to defensiveness and self-exoneration. One consequence of this move was that the post-Council of Trent seminary system, which emerged from the recognition of a genuine need for appropriate formation for priests, developed into a defensive structure in its own right. Such an educational system was incapable of producing men who could respond to the developments in thinking and culture stemming from the Enlightenment and the growth of scientific method. Stir into the ecclesiastical-cultural mix the French Revolution, the 1848 uprisings against monarchy across Europe, and the collapse of the Papal States, and there was a certain inevitability in the further defensive moves encapsulated in the ‘Modernist Crisis’ at the start of the 20th Century.

Authoritarianism and defensiveness feed each other. The Church of the first half of the 20th Century was one in which the argument from authority was dominant, and the writings of those whose views did not agree with authority were shelved under *adversarii* – a vernacular translation of which might be ‘those who are out to get us.’ Discussion, debate, and the weighing-up of evidence were not seen either as formative exercises or as means for deepening our understanding of the truth. Biblical scholars struggled with a system that required them to teach that the first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch – were ‘substantially and integrally the work of Moses.’ John Tracey Ellis quotes one seminary professor: ‘Catholic philosophy alone has the truth’, and comments ‘He echoed what others thought or practised. Students developed the weakest of all attitudes towards adversaries – one of contempt.’¹

As a promise of hope we can remind ourselves that John XXIII was the product of this seminary system, and that it was the scholarship which was carried out under such circumstances that gave rise to the definitive shift in consciousness and church culture embodied in the Second Vatican Council. The Spirit is at work in the Church, giving courage and insight even when those who should know better are focussing on defending against 'dissenters' – a vernacular translation of which term sometimes seems to be 'those who are out to get us from inside'.

All large institutions develop mechanisms of defensiveness. IBM, General Motors, Lehman Brothers – all have also paid the price for having developed an internal culture which made it impossible for those with responsibility to see the truth. One aspect of the life of the Church that has made its own defensive mechanisms so damaging is that unlike commercial organisations, the Church has had more or less total control of the training of its leaders. Seminaries at their best produced dedicated, prayerful and wise men, but the classic seminary system had a built-in bias towards conformism and the unquestioning acceptance of authority. The monastic proverb, 'Keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you' was translated into 'Keep the rules of this seminary and you will get ordained.'

This is a very dangerous pattern of life in which to be formed. Unthinking obedience and loyalty in the face of disagreement with authority can be a way of avoiding the pain and tension of conflict, doubly attractive if those in authority have arbitrary powers of appointment and promotion. But as a pattern of life it also involves a compromise, a stepping back from struggling with the Gospel-truth which is always greater than any institution. And while this way of life might seem to endow those following it with a reassuring aura of certainty, 'the people' inevitably recognise that this man's preaching and liturgy are manifestly not rooted in experience, and equally inevitably the individual's prayer, cut off from the struggle for truth, becomes empty.

But the damage is more widespread still, because the experience of being dominated (within a structure that demands, or even appears to demand, unthinking obedience) on the part of a subservient and docile priest can lead to a domineering and uncompromising approach when such a man is placed in authority. Those

placed in positions of personal authority should be people who have come to recognise the truth of their own strengths and weaknesses, in struggling with the Gospel-truth encountered in scripture, sacrament and prayer. All too often, it would seem, the Church has not supported those who find themselves in positions of authority in this necessary process of human growth.

Functional and dysfunctional

All human systems generate power and mediate power: the crucial question is how that power is mediated. Studies of functional and dysfunctional groups have indicated the characteristics of each, and it can be helpful simply to list some of these:²

Dysfunctional groups

no-talk rule
internalised feelings
unspoken expectations
entangled relationships
manipulation & control
chaotic value system
rigid attitudes
reverses past traditions
dependent relationships
jealousy & suspicion

Functional groups

open communication
expressed feelings
explicit rules
respect for individuation
respect for freedom
consistent value system
open-mindedness
creates new traditions
independence & growth
trust & love

Clearly, it is not the case that all the dysfunctional qualities apply to all aspects of the Church – but it can be argued that sufficient of them apply sufficiently for us to have real concern. The National Review Board appointed by the US Bishops' Conference to examine the child abuse events in the USA had this to say in its Report published in 2004:

Some witnesses likened the clerical culture to a feudal or military culture and said that priests and bishops who 'rocked the boat' were less likely to advance...Clericalism also contributed to a culture of secrecy. In many instances, Church leaders valued confidentiality and a priest's right to privacy above the prevention of further harm to victims and the vindication of their rights.

According to many people interviewed by the Board, outspoken priests rarely were selected to be bishops, and the outspoken bishops rarely were selected as archbishops and cardinals. The predictable result was that priests and bishops did not speak out when that is exactly what the situation demanded.

At this point we need to remind ourselves of an uncomfortable fact: in any institution, including the Church, it is not only those who are in leadership positions who maintain institutional cultures. For any culture to endure within an institution, a large proportion of the members of the institution have to support it, explicitly or implicitly, actively or passively. That a clericalist and conformist culture has survived within the Church is a shared responsibility of us all. Cultures are maintained by those who gain from their existence, so for the Church, not only those who more obviously gain but also those whose gains are less obvious, share measures of responsibility.

The psychologist Erich Fromm suggests that we live with two conflicting tendencies: to 'move out of the womb' into freedom and responsibility, and to 'return to the womb', to certainty and security. Institutions manifest that same tension, and the Church is not protected from this aspect of being human. The great majority of those who constitute the Church are committed to the building of the Kingdom and the proclamation of the Gospel, and manifest this in good and dedicated lives, whether or not they are in ordained ministry. But the pull towards certainty and security remains, and its effects can be seen in what might be understood to be 'gains' for clergy and lay people alike. In their more extreme forms, the 'gains' for the clergy include: a high standard of living, status/privilege, power, lack of accountability, and freedom from relational commitments and responsibilities. But there can be 'gains' also for lay people: the avoidance of personal responsibility, a clearly defined role, the avoidance of the costs of adult faith, and the security and 'reflected glory' that derive from dependence on another.

To state the obvious, 'gains' of these kinds are actually losses in terms of human development and fulfilled living, but maintaining priests and bishops in 'clergyhood' has met (and perhaps continues to meet) felt needs on the part of many in the Church. These needs have not always been healthy needs, and it is that which has been overlooked by those who can see no alternative ways of being Church.

In November 1993 the then Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, Joseph Bernardin, responding to abuse allegations which were later withdrawn, stated: 'I can assure you that all my life I have led a chaste, celibate life.' It is relevant to any understanding of how the Church deals with issues in the sphere of sexuality to face two facts:

- the public practice and discipline of the Church assumes that every ordained celibate is living a chaste and celibate life;
- such research as exists tells us that this assumption is not supported by the evidence; while estimates vary widely, a substantial proportion of those ordained as celibates are not able to echo Cardinal Bernardin's statement.³

This is not to accuse individuals of hypocrisy. Celibate chastity, like any form of mature sexuality, is a process of growth and integration. Richard Sipe captures this in his working definition, from a book published in 2003:

Celibacy is a freely chosen dynamic state, usually vowed, that involves an honest and sustained attempt to live without direct sexual gratification in order to serve others productively for a spiritual motive.

The problem is not one of professed celibates needing to grow into the complete expression of what they have professed and are attempting to live, but of a culture where on the one hand struggles, difficulties and failures are almost impossible to acknowledge other than in the confessional, and where on the other documented evidence exists of some cases of sexually active relationships between bishops and their clergy, and religious superiors and their subjects.⁴ Richard Sipe cites the account given by a young priest of rebuffing the sexual advances of a bishop from another diocese and being told: 'You know, Father, if you want to progress in this organisation, you are going to need friends.'⁵

It is not difficult to see how a culture of conformism and silence provides a near-perfect context for this level of dysfunction, nor to see how this culture permitted not just inappropriate but also abusive sexuality to go unchallenged.

That the Catholic Church, like all the Christian churches, is still struggling towards a coherent teaching on human sexuality is at the same time a product of this culture and a factor in its continuing existence. Many members of the Church, lay and ordained, look to their lived experience of grace and reject what might be seen as key elements of the formal teaching of the Church on this core aspect of human experience.

A more complete view

In 1956, Aldous Huxley published *Heaven and Hell*. One section of it details the neurophysiological effects of many aspects of life during Lent for monks in the medieval period. By the time Huxley has worked his way through the consequences of poor diet, the presence of various fungi and moulds in what food was available at the end of winter, the toxins released by flagellation, and the oxygen-depleting effects of prolonged chant, it is easy to share his declared surprise, not at how many monks reported visions, but at how few.

By this point in these reflections, and in response to the near-relentless media pressure of the past weeks, something similar may be taking shape for many of us regarding the pathological and abusive living-out of sexuality among celibate Catholic clergy. But the reality is crucially different. If we look beyond the headlines to what both published research and personal observation make visible, we see the great majority of professed celibates in the Church engaged in 'honest and sustained attempts' to live their celibacy with integrity, and doing this in immediate living contexts frequently devoid of much (if anything) by way of human support, within a doctrinal framework which creaks at best and displays yawning gaps at worst, and in a within-Church culture which frequently makes personal honesty, let alone forthright speaking-out, costly to the point of near-impossibility. And we see, too, those in positions of service and leadership who live out being a bishop with that same integrity, and within that same difficult context.

Looking to the future

Pope Benedict's letter to the Catholics of Ireland was brave and prophetic. For many of those who had been abused, it was not enough, but no letter could have been enough to match the suffering inflicted. Nor, it seems to me, could any number of resignations: the

suffering and betrayal involved are too great. In not mentioning what was coming to light in other countries, my personal opinion is that Pope Benedict was trying to fulfil his earlier promise to this particular local Church: this was a response to a particular situation, addressed to a particular group of people, and I think it will come to be seen as a crucial moment in the Church's history. (It is tempting to suggest that some of what has been said and written by various bishops and cardinals since Pope Benedict's letter is better forgotten, but a more healthy approach is to note the increasingly visible differences between those who are attempting to maintain a defensive status quo and those willing to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church).

But if this one letter could never heal the continuing pain of those who have been abused, or respond to everything that was and is appearing in the news media, nor should this one letter be seen as having said everything that needs to be said, or to have launched what actions need to be taken.

A 'Kairos'

What was not dealt with in Pope Benedict's letter were the ways in which the shared insights and working structures of the whole church community have been found lacking, some of which we have been exploring in this article. But that these aspects of our life as the gathered community of Jesus who is the Christ have been found lacking makes this moment of tragedy also a 'Kairos' – a moment of grace.

This past Lent has been a real experience of the brokenness and sin of the Church, and attempts on the part of some bishops and cardinals to portray it all as a secular conspiracy have only compounded the sense of brokenness and sin felt by many good men and women in the Church. But what Easter tells us is that experiences of brokenness and sin are not the end of the story.

The world we live in is not summed up by Easter Bunnies and Happy Endings, and the feast we celebrate is about neither of these. The resurrection meets head-on all that the world can throw in the face of love, all that the world can do to destroy love, all that the world can do to leach away hope and courage and trust and joy. And our experience these last months has reminded us that our church community is not set

apart from the world, that we too can be destructive of love, that we, too, can leach away hope and courage and trust and joy.

The resurrection meets all of this head-on – today, in our world, in our lives, in our Church. The resurrection meets all of this today – it is not simply that the resurrection ‘met’ something similar at the time of the death and rising of Jesus. The first witnesses of the resurrection looked at the death of Jesus and the destruction of all in which they had placed their hope and their love. We are asked to look directly at the elements of death and destruction in our life as Church: the option of turning away is no more real for us than it was for the first grieving followers of Jesus. The faces of this tragedy are always the faces of the hurt and betrayed children, and we must somehow find the courage neither to turn away from those faces nor to diminish what they show us of death and destruction.

Christ *has* died. Christ *is* risen. Both are true: both call on us to accept their truth. Without truly believing in his death, we can have no true belief in his resurrection.

In the resurrection the Father shows us which is the deeper truth: in the light of our confused faith we can learn to look at the world in all its confusion and struggle and sin, and see the signs of the resurrection already at work there. We can look around at our community of faith, at our Church in all its confusion and struggle and sin, and see here the signs of the resurrection.

Out of the wreck of a defensive, conformist, clerical culture, a new pattern of being Church is emerging. The cost has been tragic, and if there can be no place for a calculus of horror comparing abuse in different settings, neither is there any place for weighing that tragic cost against what can emerge by way of a renewed Church. But to speak of passion, death and resurrection being inseparable in the paschal shape of what it is to be human is not to attempt such a calculation, but as best I can (as best anyone can who is not directly touched by abuse) to reach into the hidden heart of all this, where our crucified and risen Lord is to be found.

Jesus shares our life: not just those aspects which we might see as ‘more appropriate’, but all that makes up our life. And in sharing our life, Jesus opens it to the power of the resurrection – not just those aspects which we might see as ‘more appropriate’, but all that makes up our life. So it is in the presence of the Resurrected One that we move into this period of Kairos, where by facing the brokenness and sin that are part of our story as Church, we can allow the Spirit of Jesus to lead us into a still deeper conversion as Church, and so recover the deeper and fuller story that tells us what it is to be the community of the followers of Jesus.

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¹ *The Last Priests in America*, Tim Unsworth, New York, Crossroad, 1991, cited in *Sacred Silence*, Donald Cozzens Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2004

² Michael Crosby, *The Dysfunctional Church*, Notre Dame Indiana, Ave Maria Press, 1991

³ E.g. Richard Sipe: (1) *Sex, Priests & Power*, London, Cassell, 1995, in which Sipe quotes Cardinal Sanchez, the then Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, speaking on BBC TV in 1993 about Sipe’s estimates: ‘I have no reason to doubt the validity of those figures.’ (2) *Celibacy in Crisis*, New York, Brunner Routledge, 2003, in which Sipe sets out and reviews his methodology.

⁴ Here I am drawing on Sipe’s work once more, including the 1995 & 2003 works already cited. See also *Perversion of Power*, Mary Gail Frawley-O’Dea, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2007.

⁵ Quoted in Sipe, 1995, p.173.