

## Reflections of current discussions on sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church

What has become clear in the avalanche of articles, interviews and letters following the increasing number of revelations of sexual abuse by priests in the Roman Catholic Church is that the real scandal is the history of cover-ups – priests simply and secretly being moved on, thus putting possible other victims at risk. Such cover-ups betray an attitude which values saving face for the institution over the tragedies being multiplied. It also ignores the fact that what has happened is not only, in church language, sinful, but that it is also a criminal act and hence subject to the jurisdiction of the secular criminal courts. In no way can it simply be treated internally in terms of the institution's canon law. Two focal points of discussion have emerged – that of allocating responsibility for the cover up and the link with the enforced discipline of celibacy.

### ***Responsibility***

Taking into account the overcentralised, bureaucratic labyrinth of the institution's structures, attempts to allocate individual responsibility, to find out who exactly knew what, seems a futile and fruitless exercise. Likewise the institution must give up scapegoating and trying to shift the blame elsewhere e.g. the secularisation of society, that we misinterpreted Vatican II, our broken society. This has occurred within the institution which must look to itself. The question must be pushed to deeper levels. In 1418 the Council of Constance decreed that there should be a general council every ten years to supervise the papacy and curia. That never happened – the institution became more and more centralised with almost everything of importance having to be referred to Rome. Since Vatican Council 1 was peremptorily cutshort because of troop invasions in Italy it was able to deal only with Pope and bishops. Hope dawned with two important principles of the Second Vatican Council. The concept of the collegiality of the bishops could have led to the bishop of Rome really and truly becoming *primus inter pares*. More importantly there was increased focus on the need to put into practice internally the principle of subsidiarity, namely that nothing should be dealt with at a higher level which could be ably dealt with at a lower level. When cases of sexual abuse by leaders of the institution arose what was required was an analysis of the local situation by the competent church authorities in tandem with the criminal justice system of the particular country. Instead, individual bishops, many appointed by Rome as 'yes' men, were unable to respond. They acted as they all had acted, to save face for the institution.

### ***The link with celibacy***

It obviously would be too simplistic to argue for a direct, causal link between sexual abuse and celibacy. There are many celibates, and not only those who are celibate for religious motives, who have never been involved with abuse. Likewise sexual abuse, it is often argued, mainly takes place in families and non celibates are implicated. It is here that all concerned, whether arguing for or against a link with celibacy, must clean up their language and make important and appropriate distinctions. "Sexual abuse" is too all-encompassing a term. The Holy See's official prosecutor says that the Vatican's disciplinary office dealt with three thousand cases of sexual misconduct since 2001, covering crimes committed over the past fifty years. About three hundred of these involved 'paedophiles' in the true sense of the term – abuse based on attraction to prepubescent children. About 60% of the cases concerned adolescents i.e. 'Ephedophilia'. These are the Vatican's own figures and it is here that a link with enforced celibacy can be argued. Education and training, from tender years, in an enclosed all male environment can lead to undeveloped emotional and



sexual maturity and hence an attraction to children of adolescent years. Add to this the growing discussion of the place of celibacy in the church. For many the feeling must have grown that celibacy is simply a matter of church discipline, part of a package that must be accepted if one wishes to act out the judgement that one is called to serve God and the community as a priest. Add on the astonishing decline in numbers of priestly personnel, overwork and, above all the lack of a community base for the priestly life - is it any wonder that so many have gone astray.

### ***The future***

Disastrous though it is, the entire picture is not negative. There are many loyal and faithful priests who have never been tainted with the scandal of sexual misconduct. There are, no doubt, also some who feel called to celibacy as a way of life. Some steps also have been taken to ensure that cover up is not the preferred option-procedures, for example, are now in place in English dioceses and, I suppose elsewhere. Whether they like it or not the church in England has to obey the need for criminal bureau checks on those working with young children and the vulnerable elderly. Analogously one can compare the public enquiries set up to deal with cases of physical abuse and even deaths among young children who are already in the sights of the social services. Neither problem is likely to completely go away and were require robust safeguards to minimise the dangers in both cases. One future danger perhaps is to be found in the church's move to fast track dismissals for offenders. In its own way that could merely move the problem elsewhere and also shows lack of pastoral concern for the offenders.

Then, too, in all the concern for victims and predators we need to spare a thought for the many members of the Roman Catholic communities to tally bowled over by perceived betrayal. They had such an investment of trust and confidence in the spiritual leaders of their communities. This has now been shattered. Radical reform of the labyrinthine, bureaucratic institution, the stimulation of openness and responsible decisionmaking and, above all, a transparent and more democratic institution is the only way to restore shattered hopes and confidence.

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