

Towards Healing

A Lenten Reflection



IRISH CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

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God's Healing

On Ash Wednesday we pray,

Father in heaven,
the light of your truth bestows sight
to the darkness of sinful eyes.
May this season of repentance
bring us the blessing of your forgiveness
and the gift of your light
through Christ our Lord

Lent challenges Christians to learn to see things more clearly and to recognise that we are sinners. We learn to see God's truth, light and mercy revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus came into the world to free us from sin and death and from every evil. In his life, God's healing and transforming love were at work: 'He went about doing good, and his actions concerned primarily those who were suffering and seeking help... He was sensitive to every human suffering, whether of the body or of the soul'.¹ We who are Christians are called to continue the healing mission of Christ in the world. The Good Samaritan is our model. We must not, like the priest and the Levite in the parable, pass by on the other side, failing to see somebody's suffering because we are too wrapped up in our own business to notice. To be a Good Samaritan means being available to listen, to learn, to understand and to offer wholehearted help.²



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1. Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, 16.
 2. Cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, 28.

In recent years the pain of people who suffered sexual abuse as children has at last begun to receive the public attention and understanding it deserves. We bishops, like all members of the Church, are very painfully aware of the dreadful betrayal of trust and the scandalous contradictions that are involved when a child is abused by an adult. This betrayal is vastly greater when that adult is a priest or religious. Instead of being respected and protected by people whom they trusted, the children were used and humiliated and damaged in unthinkable ways. All of us, bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful have a particular responsibility to learn the deep wrong that has been done to them, to share their pain and to help in their healing. We want to show them that the whole Church community is appalled at what has happened to them and wishes to listen, to understand and to help.



In this reflection, we do not attempt to address every facet of the issue of child sexual abuse. It is our intention to publish further reflections on other aspects of this painful and complex reality. We have learned some lessons. We know there are more that we need to learn.

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Learning the Lessons

It is a cliché to describe the last ten years as a 'steep learning curve'. *One of the most important services we can offer to members of the Church and to Irish society in general is to share the experience of that deeply painful learning.*

Anything that could allow child abuse to happen and to be hidden has to be addressed and corrected. We will do all we can to ensure that young people will find in the Church an active and warm welcome carried on according to the highest standards of best practice in the area of child protection.

It is perfectly clear, however, that a great deal of what we have learned is applicable in every area of society. The beginning of Lent is an appropriate time to reflect on those lessons.

1. Disbelief

We have learned for instance how extremely difficult it can be to overcome the disbelief which responds to a report of child sexual abuse by saying: 'I have known this person very well for years. He is a friend. I have seen him doing admirable work. He appears to be well liked by everyone. There is no way that he could be involved in something so appalling as the sexual abuse of a child.'

It would be a tragedy if the necessary exposure of the ways in which this kind of thinking was at work in the Church were seen simply as having revealed something peculiar to the Church. It would be foolish to believe that these



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incredulous responses to someone voicing a complaint or suspicion have not occurred, and may not still occur, in families, in neighbourhoods, in professions and in organisations. The real learning curve will be when we as a society honestly ask how far the very same factors were part of the reason that the other 97 per cent of abuse³ – not related to clergy or religious – happened and did not come to light.

Perhaps nobody can fully learn that lesson until they have undergone the horror, the disillusionment, the disgust and the anguish of discovering that a colleague, a family member, a friend is indeed capable of such behaviour. We all have to learn the lessons of the need for vigilance and for a willingness to listen, even to something we had never imagined could be true. And we have to learn these lessons without arriving at a point where all ministry to children and all work with children takes place in an atmosphere of mistrust.

3. Goode, H., McGee, H., O'Boyle, C., *Time to Listen*, The Liffey Press 2003, p. 25 commissioned by the Bishops' Committee on Child Protection.

2. Discretion

We bishops have also learned that an instinct to deal with such matters discreetly can lead to a failure to take necessary steps. A certain misplaced loyalty may contribute to the tendency to keep matters secret in organisations as well as within families. It has not been an easy lesson. A similar discretion was, and is, at work throughout society. The media have done Ireland a service in bringing the sexual abuse of children into the public arena. Much of what is now coming to light happened three or more decades ago in every area of society. There does not appear to have been willingness at that time to speak or write about incest or sexual abuse wherever it might have occurred; perhaps there was also an unwillingness even to hear about such things.

Whether in families or in neighbourhoods or in organisations, the temptation to ‘deal with this as quietly as possible’ is still very strong. The reasons for this are not all dishonourable. This is a difficult area in which to work out the right path.

The first concern of those who care about a child or young person who has suffered sexual abuse may be to spare them further suffering. Parents may be tempted to ‘play down’ their own horror and anguish lest it intensify the young person’s trauma. The child may dread the thought of reporting the crime and becoming involved with a police investigation. These natural feelings need to be confronted by the overriding need to ensure that an abuser is identified and dealt with by the law and that the risk is brought to the

attention of the relevant officials of civil child protection agencies.

Sometimes friends and family can be so traumatised by what they are hearing and so concerned for the person who has suffered, that they do not address the possibility that this dreadful act may be taking place with other children or may be repeated in the future. Wisdom and courage may be required to take the steps that are necessary to prevent an abuser from harming other children.

It may be that a third party will have to decide that it is necessary to report the abuse in direct opposition to the wishes of the person who has been abused, even when that information had been communicated in confidence.

The 'Framework Document' of 1996 formulated our Reporting Policy as follows:

In all instances where it is known or suspected that a child has been, or is being, sexually abused by a priest or religious the matter should be reported to the civil authorities. Where the suspicion or knowledge results from the complaint of an adult of abuse during his or her childhood, this should also be reported to the civil authorities.⁴

4. Irish Catholic Bishops' Advisory Committee on Child Sexual Abuse, *Child Sexual Abuse: Framework for a Church Response*, Veritas 1996, p 21.

When someone wishes to make a report of child sexual abuse ‘in complete confidence’, it is hard to have to tell them that one is not willing to accept their report on that basis. It is particularly troubling when the person then walks away without imparting the information. Nevertheless, undertakings of absolute confidentiality should never be given to a person reporting child sexual abuse.⁵

3. The right to one’s good name

The ‘paramountcy principle’, which says that the protection of children must be ‘the first and paramount consideration’,⁶ has been explicitly stated as our policy since the publication of our ‘framework document’ in 1996. We are committed to applying it.

There are, however, difficult issues to be faced and lessons to be learned in applying this principle. The steps that are necessary in order to protect children may involve a grave risk of destroying the good name of a person against whom nothing has been proven.

When someone is accused of child sexual abuse, it is understandable that there may be calls for information and for transparency. These can be in conflict with the rights of a person who has been accused, but not found to be guilty. Where somebody must be made to stand down from his

5. *Child Sexual Abuse: Framework for a Church Response*, p. 22.

6. *Child Sexual Abuse: Framework for a Church Response* pp. 18, 22

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or her position because there is a fear that there may be a danger to children, it is often important to do so with the minimum publicity lest one irrevocably damage the good name of an accused person whose guilt has not been established. The paramountcy principle certainly demands that someone who may be a risk to children should be taken out of the situation where he or she allegedly abused and, so far as that is possible, from any situation where abuse might take place. It certainly demands that the civil authorities should take all necessary steps to protect children and should urgently investigate the allegation. In what circumstances this might involve a public announcement before there is any outcome to the investigation is not so clear.

Where it is necessary to ask a person to stand aside pending an investigation, any statement which needs to be made should include a sentence highlighting the presumption of innocence. Any subsequent coverage in the media should avoid anything that might reveal the identity of the person stepping aside. If this does not happen, grave injustice and hurt may result.

It would be a pity if people concluded that struggling with this dilemma was simply the result of a culture of secrecy. We all need to come to an understanding of the complicated issues of

creating a proper balance of various considerations: child protection first and foremost, the rights and interests of all concerned, the desire for openness but also the importance of respect for the good name of those against whom nothing has been proven.

4. Deficient responses

The most important learning process in the last decade has been about the measures that need to be taken to prevent further abuse by someone whose guilt has been established.

In the case of a priest who had abused, bishops in the past often responded by having him assessed and/or treated by experts, and by taking steps which tried to ensure that he would not behave in this dreadful fashion again. If the experts indicated that he was not a threat to children, he was often assigned to a new parish, accompanied by serious warnings. There were a number of serious flaws in that approach.

The main one was a failure to recognise the obsessive, repetitive nature of child abuse by many abusers. This resulted in a failure to appreciate the risk to other potential victims. There was often a readiness, not only among bishops, but also among professional psychologists or psychiatrists, to believe a priest who claimed that this was an isolated aberration, carried out perhaps under the influence of drink. We now know how necessary it is in these circumstances to consider that this man might have abused many times and might continue to do so no matter how strongly he was warned or how carefully he had been assessed.

The temptation to make responses that are now seen to be inadequate was not confined to the Church. There were angry fights and threats in families, maybe barring a relative from the home; there were bitter rows among neighbours; there were severe warnings by police officers; there were incidents where local people beat up someone they believed to be a 'dirty old man'. What all of these responses had in common was that those who engaged in them were left with what all too often proved to be an unfounded hope that 'he will never do anything like that again'.

The various agencies that may have a role to play – Gardaí or PSNI, Health Boards or Health and Social Services Boards, and those who have responsibility in the particular context in which the abuse occurred may all need to know and, so far as possible, work together.

The second flaw was that professional opinion in the past was more optimistic about the prospect for successful treatment of paedophiles than it is today: 'This led many of those treating paedophilia to believe that paedophiles could be returned to their environment with minimal or no risk of repeating their behaviour'.⁷ While the advice of professionals in this area is to be valued and taken with the greatest seriousness, it is necessary to remain acutely aware that knowledge in this area is still developing.

7. *Time to Listen*, p. 52, 53.

5. Discerning the Questions

Unfortunately, one of the most overwhelming lessons that we have learned is how much we still need to learn. Many of the questions cannot be addressed and responded to by bishops or by Church bodies alone. They can only be addressed if we as a society address them together.

- a) The question about what happens to those, whether priests, religious or laypeople, who have sexually abused children after the civil authorities have dealt with the complaint is one for the whole community. It might be tempting just to wish that offenders, having been convicted and served a prison sentence, would simply vanish. That is failing to face the issue. Our society as a whole needs to ask what kind of circumstances, management, structures of answerability and support will best protect children, the community, and the offender, against the commission of further offences. Who in the community should know about his or her presence and whereabouts?
- b) It would be unrealistic to take refuge in some supposed ability of the Church, or even of the Garda Síochána or PSNI, to monitor and supervise every moment of a released offender's life – or indeed to monitor a person who is under investigation or awaiting the outcome of a trial. It may be that some sort of support structure is at least as important as supervision in providing an effective safeguard. It might even be that the sense of being unremittently monitored and mistrusted

- could make rehabilitation less likely and a released offender more dangerous. There is a great need for thorough research to provide a basis for seeking the social consensus necessary to deal realistically with this issue. It will be essential to evaluate the effectiveness of various preventive measures so that society can implement the best possible strategies to minimise the danger of abuse.
- c) The lengthy period that may elapse between learning of an allegation and the outcome of a thorough criminal investigation raises particular problems. If a person has been made to stand aside, a promise that he or she may be reinstated should the case prove to be unsubstantiated becomes less and less credible as time goes by. After four or more years, which would not be unknown, it may have become extremely difficult for someone shown to be innocent to take up his or her life again. This is particularly true of a priest, given the public nature of his ministry.
 - d) Our experience shows that there are no obvious signs that characterise a child-abuser. A perpetrator is often the person one would least have suspected. There needs to be well-founded research about the causes and the warning signs of a predisposition towards child sexual abuse.⁸ Professions which give privileged

8. John Jay College Research Team, *Child Sexual Abuse, A Review of the Literature, 2004* which was undertaken on behalf of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, is an important contribution to meeting this need.

access to children and which may, therefore, prove attractive to paedophiles, need to be especially careful in screening and monitoring candidates. This is a priority for the Church and is an important part of the child protection measures to which we are committed.

- e) It is also important to reflect about how we as a society should respond to situations where abuse may have occurred, but nothing has been or is likely to be established. On the one hand we have to consider the rights of the accused person. From the point of view of the accused it might seem reasonable that if no prosecution is taken or after acquittal by a criminal court he or she should be treated as an innocent person. Others might say that it would be necessary to reach at least the level of evidence required in a civil court where the balance of probabilities would decide. But we also have to consider that children and their parents or guardians have a right to be as certain as is possible that those who have access to their children are not abusers. Does this, however, mean that accused persons are required to prove their innocence beyond reasonable doubt and might that often be impossible? What kind of criteria or decision-making process should apply to such cases? Obviously if we bishops try to work out the answers to such questions we will be accused of bias. But these are not just issues for us; failure to see their wider applicability would be an evasion of responsibility by the whole of society. We are very willing to participate in a discussion of the principles and criteria that should apply to these issues.

6. The Wider Impact

Our first concern must be the harm that has been done to those whose trust was betrayed when they were children. It is also true, however, that other people are caught up in the effects of child abuse.

The report, *Time to Listen*, did a valuable service in studying the impact of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious on those whom it called 'secondary victims':

Families of those who have suffered abuse, and particularly parents, often experience a sense of helplessness at not having been able to protect their children, a sense of powerlessness and anger when civil or church authorities are not responding as they had expected, and apprehension about the long term effects of the abuse.

Families of those who perpetrate abuse often experience grief, humiliation and a loss of friends. They have a constant struggle, torn between not wishing to abandon their relative yet abhorring his actions. They may wonder whether they could have done anything to detect and prevent the abuse.

Colleagues of an abuser often feel shock and disbelief. They have had to cope with the shock of realising that a colleague or colleagues have been guilty of a terrible offence against innocent children. They wonder whether they should have noticed something. Priests frequently express their dissatisfaction about how the issue was handled either because they believe things were hushed up or because they believe that colleagues

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they regard as innocent were treated too harshly. They have felt themselves to be the objects of suspicion and hostility which they have done nothing to deserve.

Members of the wider Church community suffer. They suffer in a very personal way when a priest they have known, a priest who has ministered to them, is accused and either admits his offence or is clearly shown to have abused children. This can cause great disillusionment, worry about the effects of this on their own children's faith, a less trusting attitude towards priests in general.

All of this points to the wider dimensions of the task of healing, which is a major task for the Church and for society in the years ahead.

Walking the Road

People who have suffered abuse tell us repeatedly that what they want above all is healing and closure. They need above all to find reliable and understanding companions to walk with them along the often disheartening and difficult road towards healing. Space and time are needed in order to be able to discover and respond to the many dimensions of healing that are needed in each individual's journey.

In its response the Church, not just the bishops and clergy, but all Christians through their gifts and skills and time and friendship, must aim to bring healing to those who have suffered child sexual abuse. In response to these needs bishops, and religious superiors, have been ready to make provision for counselling and for other kinds of support. The various efforts that have been made in this direction need to be strengthened and expanded. It is especially important that they should be disentangled from any legal process that may be going on.



We are committed to finding and offering ways by which those who have suffered abuse can explore with competent and compassionate people the steps that might lead them towards healing. These may involve ongoing counselling; there may well be a need for marriage counselling or family counselling; it may be that a person's education has been blighted by the experience of abuse and that some kind of educational provision would help to realise his or her potential; there may be a need for financial advice or help with various needs, for instance ways of relieving pressures, financial and otherwise, on the family, there may be a

place for a financial recognition of the pain that the person has suffered; there may be issues that a survivor of child sexual abuse wishes to address about his or her relationship with God or with the Church.

In many cases the journey towards healing will involve different needs at different stages of life. As we learn more about how people can be helped on the road towards healing, new dimensions may need to be added to our response. We recognise that the journey of healing may need to continue for a lengthy period or that it may need to be taken up again at a later stage.

We should not forget those who were abused by people other than clergy and religious. They too should be able to meet Good Samaritans among the followers of Christ. The figures in the SAVI Report make it clear that every community has many people who experienced some level of sexual abuse as children – almost one third of women and a quarter of men.⁹ Those who have been abused by people other than priests and religious, especially those whose abusers are now dead, may feel that there is no one to whom they can turn for redress. They too have a claim on our response and we wish them to feel that they can turn to the Church for help.

9. McGee, H., Garavan, R., de Barra, M., Byrne, N. Conroy, R., *The SAVI Report*, The Liffey Press, 2002, p. xxxiii, 67.

Reconciliation with the Church

One of the greatest losses for people who were abused as children, and indeed for their families is that it has often made it hard for them to see the Church as a source of hope and consolation and strength. This is true in a particularly raw and intense way of those whose innocent trust was exploited and destroyed by people who were supposed to be expressions of the Church's mission, which is to be a sign and instrument of God's tender, healing, welcoming love. If, when they found the courage to report the matter, they failed to find the understanding and help they hoped for from Church personnel and Church bodies, their sense of disillusionment and distress was intensified.

They know that the Church is their Church, yet the continuing effects of the unjust and cruel way in which they have been treated makes it very difficult for them to feel at home or at ease in participating in religious ceremonies. At the same time, they often feel a deep tug towards something that they have lost. They are often touched by memories of a time when these signs and ceremonies meant a great deal to them.

Many of them remain strong believers in God and find support in prayer and will say that they will never allow the abuser to take away their faith. Others, however, say, often with a great sense of loss, that they have been 'robbed of their faith'. All of us who try to serve the Church as best we can feel that loss too. We believe that they have been robbed of what is most precious. We would dearly love to be able to restore what was taken from them through actions that were



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in complete contradiction to the faith their abusers were meant to serve.

It is a duty on all of us to help people who have suffered abuse to see the face of Jesus in the life of the Christian community. That means that we all need to learn more about the anguish and harm that child abuse causes and about the need for healing in so many lives. We need to make our communities ones in which the journey towards peace and wholeness can be made.

A person whose trust has been damaged by a priest or religious may find it difficult to begin to participate more fully in the life of the Church. Their decision to do so will, please God, be taken in their own time and their own manner. In coming to that decision they should find gentle and discreet support. We must try to ensure that we do not put obstacles in the way of that return to fuller participation.

There are many resources in the community of the Church – spiritual direction, counselling, educational skill, financial know-how, medical and psychiatric expertise, artistic talent – the list could go on. To people with these skills – and with many others – we say, ‘Would you consider putting these at the service of the journey

towards the many dimensions of healing that are needed to address the great harm done to those who have suffered child abuse?’

It would be a practical and realistic step towards healing if each diocese could call on a pool of people who would be willing to help someone along the road towards putting their life together and, perhaps, towards finding their way back to the Church and to our loving God.

The needs that such a resource could meet would not be confined to the people abused by priests and religious. The hand of friendship could be offered also to those who were abused in other contexts and whose trust and, perhaps religious faith, may also have been undermined by their experience.

Both those who have been abused and those who walk with them along the road to healing are making a Lenten journey. They face together the darkness that evil casts over human life and learn to trust in the promise of the new creation in Christ which offers all of us a hope beyond all we have ever imagined.

This is the promise of Easter. Even the darkness, the betrayal, the devastation and the agony of Calvary cannot defeat the light:

Through your faith, God’s power will guard you until the salvation which had been prepared is revealed at the end of time. This is a cause of great joy for you, even though you may for a short time have to bear being plagued by all sorts of trials; so that, when Jesus Christ is revealed your

faith will have been tested and proved like gold – only it is more precious than gold, which is corruptible even though it bears testing by fire – and then you will have praise and glory and honour (1 Peter 1:5-7).

God our Father and our rock,
Jesus Christ our Saviour,
Holy Spirit, Giver of Life,
we are all in need of your healing.
Help us to open our broken hearts
to your restoring love.
Help us to be for one another
support and strength.
May we journey together towards
the joy of your presence,
where every tear will be wiped away
and all things will be made new.