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Priests under Pressure – *the less-heard voices*

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As a Roman Catholic priest and a registered therapist, and especially as one who has experience and considerable training in the area of safeguarding children, I have seen vast amounts of published material on the scandals of the sexual abuse of children both by Catholic priests and in society at large. Official Roman Catholic Church (hereafter referred to as the Church) and governmental reports and policy statements, pronouncements by senior Church leaders, reports from other faith organisations, and countless books, articles, theses and global media reports have examined the scandalous sexual abuse of children by clerics and the often equally scandalous way the abuses have been managed once they came to light.

This flood of material has focused primarily on two aspects of the scandals: first on the plight of the primary victims of abuse, the children. This emphasis is legitimate considering the unthinkable betrayal of children by some clerics which eventually led the Church to adopt the ‘paramountcy principle’ introduced by the United Kingdom’s 1989 Children Act to put the protection of children first. The second focus has been on the effects on the Church as a religious institution caused not just by the cases of abuse but also by the almost equally unthinkable betrayal of the children, the Church and its values by its senior leadership which so often mishandled allegations and perpetrators by initially refusing to believe what was going on, then seeking to protect the institutional reputation of the Church at all costs.

There have been analyses of priest offenders. There has even been some acknowledgement of the effects of this double-barrelled scandal on secondary victims: the families of victims, the families

1 This article is based on the author’s doctoral thesis which is soon to be published in book form.

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of perpetrators, and parishioners whose faith in the Church could have been shaken. However, there has been little or no regard given to a fourth group of secondary victims: non-offending priests. There has been no extensive published data on or interpretations of the psychological and other effects of the scandals on priests who played no part in them other than to attempt to continue their vocation while the crises swirled around them. I therefore undertook a doctoral study for the University of Manchester to identify and analyse the effects on non-offending priests by way of in-depth psychological interviews with a small representative sample of Roman Catholic clergy in England and Wales.

My findings reveal eight broad areas of concern, superordinate themes which continue to seriously affect how these priests view other priests, their confidence in themselves as priests, their perception of their role in ministering to children and their faith in the establishment they serve. They also reveal that the Catholic Church, despite being the fount of their religious and moral lives and their 'employer', is not addressing these concerns in a co-ordinated way, or at all. One of the superordinate themes, betrayal, bridges both dimensions of the crisis as priests struggle to deal with brother priests who have betrayed them and with the Church which is both a victim and a perpetrator of betrayal.

CONDUCTING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

My research explored difficult questions around the clergy child sex abuse crisis and its effect on day-to-day ministry with children for non-offending priests. It then examined the psychological, emotional and spiritual effects of the scandal on non-offending priests. The nearly 6,000 Roman Catholic priests in England and Wales was too large a group to allow me to reach firm conclusions from quantitative research. I therefore chose qualitative research through intensive interviews with six non-offending priests.

The six were randomly selected from consenting priests representing each of the 22 Roman Catholic dioceses in England and Wales who were attending a 2011 national conference entitled 'Safeguarding as Ministry'. The selection was made by my then University of Manchester thesis supervisor and, several months after the conference, I conducted one-to-one interviews with each of them under the strict guidelines of the University Research Ethics Committee and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, including keeping their identities strictly confidential. The interviewees included five diocesan priests and one from a religious order, with levels of experience ranging from recently ordained to decades of service in diverse locations in England and Wales.

The number of priests I interviewed was intentionally small so I could illuminate in detail the human experiences of non-offending Catholic priests who are still in ministry as opposed to conducting a cold and clinical statistical survey. I used psychologically accepted qualitative interviewing methods which enabled me to accompany the interviewees through their journey into this very difficult issue.

I was aware throughout my research that I was an ‘insider researcher’, a Roman Catholic priest and a practising therapist who was also in the unusual position of having counselled both victims of child sexual abuse and their clergy perpetrators. The six other priests knew I was both a priest like them and a safeguarding specialist. As an ordained priest, I was aware that knowing too much about my interviewees was not always an advantage. I had to be aware of the danger of comparing my own experience with that of my interviewees.

On the plus side, being a priest interviewing brother priests enabled me to facilitate what were difficult and sensitive conversations for this group and therefore to obtain full and frank revelations from priests on a previously undiscussed taboo subject. Being a brother priest seemed to far outweigh my role as a Diocesan Safeguarding Co-Ordinator. Each interviewee was prepared to share extensive data related to his experience of being a priest in ministry during this crisis. Each interviewee spoke openly and candidly from the moment the tape recorder was switched on until the end of the interview roughly an hour later, and there appeared to be no need to establish a ‘therapeutic alliance’ to enable personal sharing to take place. This greatly helped the research process and the dual role of priest and researcher, far from being a problem, appeared to facilitate the research task.

The level of trust that was established with all six participants enabled me to be confident that the findings were both authentic and worth analysing. Additionally, my own experience and the reactions of fellow priests with whom I have shared the rich responses in the interviews indicate the six interviewees were not atypical in any way. I was therefore able to uncover what Revd. Professor Peter M. Gubi, Professor of Counselling and Spiritual Accompaniment at the University of Chester, describes as ‘the less-heard voices’.

THE TRAUMA EXPERIENCED BY NON-OFFENDING PRIESTS

My interviews with the six non-offending priests produced near unanimity and revealed areas of concern under eight superordinate themes, each with its own group of subordinate themes, which ran through their discussions with me (see the table that follows).

Superordinate Themes	Number of Interviewees Raising this Theme	Subordinate Themes
An Existential Crisis	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holocaust • Earth-shattering/Horrific • Unbelievable • Feeling of being overwhelmed
Grief and Loss	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of core identity • Loss of authority and lack of confidence in the institutional Church • Loss of reference point
Fear	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear for the future of the Church • Fear of false allegations • Fear of working with children
Betrayal	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Betrayal by perpetrators • Betrayal by Church authorities (national and international)
Shame and Isolation	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectively branded • Adverse media coverage • Ridicule and humiliation • Stigma
Impasse	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tension between reconciling clergy perpetrators and justice for victims • Lack of leadership from bishops
Lack of Confidence in the Institutional Church as regards this issue	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of openness and transparency • Disillusionment
Resilience and Commitment	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loyalty • Tenacity • Forgiveness • Faith

The priests I interviewed reported an existential crisis in their sense of priesthood, ministry and identity. They reported fundamental changes in how they viewed other priests and how they perceived themselves to be viewed by lay Catholics within the Church, describing themselves as feeling ‘defiled’ and ‘contaminated’ by scandals that were like a ‘holocaust’, ‘the worst thing that has ever happened’ to them. The issue seriously dented their confidence as priests both in themselves and in the establishment they served. Only one of the six, the most recently ordained, did not feel he was facing an existential crisis.

All six non-offending priests experienced a sense of grief and loss. They reported a loss of confidence in Church authorities which they previously found to be trustworthy. Secondly, they reported a sense of loss as regards their own identity and their role in the wider scheme of things in the Church. The interviewees all reported that the scandal was their first experience of being made to feel untrustworthy by the general public. There were feelings of fear and betrayal and a combined feeling of shame and isolation.

Five of the six interviewees felt that there was a disconnect between their experiences and views and the official stance of the Church. This led to a feeling of impasse which, in turn, led to a lack of confidence in the institutional Church as regards this issue. Despite these experiences, these priests demonstrated a personal resilience and a continuing commitment to the Church.

The overwhelming impact of the abuse crisis and the way it was managed by the Church authorities was the feeling of betrayal reported by all six interviewees. I found it interesting to note that, whilst the feeling of having been shamed and let down and the anger against the perpetrators who were brother priests were manifestly evident, it was the feeling of betrayal by Church authorities, both national and international, that caused the deepest wound. Thus a sense of betrayal, whilst a superordinate theme in its own right, was a thread running through all the superordinate themes.

The feelings that they expressed ranged from being overwhelmed to losing their reference point, fear, betrayal, humiliation, tension and disillusionment. These were balanced by feelings of loyalty, tenacity, forgiveness and faith which were enabling them to maintain their roles as priests. But the research also found contradictions, ambiguities and confusion which likely indicate continuing difficulties in processing the effects of trauma from the Church’s child sex abuse scandal.

One of the themes that emerged was the deep bond of brotherhood that exists between priests. All the priests I interviewed were in no doubt that priests who sexually abuse children had betrayed a sacred trust. But this was balanced by a desire to offer treatment

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and support to the men who had behaved in this way. The interviewees all reported that the sexual abuse of children by some in the clergy caused them the most anxiety and was both spiritually and theologically disturbing. They also reported that their main challenge was trying to balance forgiveness for the perpetrators with their own strong sense of outrage, disgust and betrayal.

The interviewees sometimes contradicted themselves and this fostered a degree of ambiguity. Rather than questioning the integrity of the findings, this is more likely indicative of the traumatic effect of the crisis and their ability to process its effects, which in part led to some confusion. It is also possible that they were working out their thoughts in the process of the interviews, as all of the priests said that this was the first opportunity they had to have a thorough, focused conversation about the abuse crisis and its effect on their lives, priestly identity and ministry. In such circumstances, they may have been adjusting and nuancing their thinking in the process of hearing their own answers and interacting with me, the interviewer.

All of the interviewees displayed an extraordinary depth of faith in their own ministry both present and future, in the resilience of their parishioners and in their own continued, deeply-held personal religious belief. All of this happened despite the trauma. Perhaps the experience of the interview enabled each participant to voice his concerns and process the effects which, in turn, seems to have brought them full circle back to a place where they can begin to rediscover confidence in the future of the Church, despite its imperfections.

THE CHURCH AND ITS ORGANISATION

One of the most critical concerns revealed in the interviews is the reported poor or complete lack of communication between priests and their bishop/superior which was part of the priests' lack of confidence in the culture of the institutional Church stemming from its handling of the sexual abuse crisis.

The relationship between a priest and his bishop is not the same as that between an employer and an employee. It is a relationship established on trust. When a priest is ordained he enters into a life-long 'covenant', integral to which is a mutual commitment not just to the Church's teaching but also to the bishop and his successors. This relationship is bidirectional, as mentioned in Canon n348 of the Code of Canon Law, with the bishop having an obligation not just to secure the welfare of his priests but also actively to promote it. The comments made by five of the six interviewees point to a very serious concern about the fracture of this integral dynamic, which is a theological, moral, spiritual and (in a canonical sense)

legal one between a bishop and his priest. Questioning aspects of Church teaching and organisation is normal for Catholic priests, a healthy challenging search for the balance between Church teaching and the realities of day-to-day ministry. However, the level of questioning of the Church was of a different order in these interviews. It involved a profound loss of confidence in the institutional Church which, in every other context, was their point of reference. Two of the consequences of this were their feelings of being abandoned and of being disillusioned with aspects of how the Church was being run. At the same time, just as they revealed conflicting feelings of disgust and sympathy for clergy perpetrators, the priests also displayed sympathy for bishops who had mishandled scandals as well as a determination to remain in the Church. For each of the interviewees, the priesthood continued to be much more than either a job or a career; it identified the very core of who they were. Whilst this gave them an extraordinary degree of loyalty to the institutional Church; it also compounded the depth of pain which they expressed.

LESSONS TO LEARN

If the experiences of these six priests are representative of the broad Church, they have revealed that non-offending clergy have been seriously affected psychologically by this crisis and that the Church, globally and domestically, has yet to recognise and address these issues as well as radical issues related to their role in ministry and their relationship with their bishops. The feelings of the six non-offending priests could be shared by all in the Catholic clergy and other professions affected by similar scandals and could also assist therapists to devise appropriate counselling. These feelings could be dealt with in counselling, either within the Church or by outside therapists. Bishops/religious superiors therefore could offer opportunities for therapeutic intervention for non-offending clergy, to facilitate dialogue between bishops, religious superiors and their priests, and to facilitate peer dialogue and support.

The responses from my six non-offending priests also unearthed several other possibilities for further support for non-offending priests:

- ongoing human development training for priests especially around celibacy, loneliness, sexuality and intimacy;
- training in how to have difficult conversations about difficult subjects, and how to have conversations where there is an element of fear in the air;

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- counselling to promote ‘adult’ relationships between bishops and priests;
- therapy or consultancy support for priests and bishops to create space to discuss how they have been affected by the abuse crisis;
- meetings of priests, with an independent facilitator, to enable the priests to talk to each other, listen to each other and engage with their bishop around these issues.

The priests in my study spoke about the limitations of their formation programmes, but tended to frame this as part of the ‘system’ and the Church culture at that time. All of them wanted to see more emphasis on human and psychosexual formation, not only as a result of the crisis, but in order to better equip priests to live healthy lives and to function effectively and safely in ministry.

To a greater or lesser extent, a degree of disillusionment continues between priests and their bishop or religious superior. The experience and perceptions of bishops or religious superiors also comprise an area that warrants serious research, so I am about to embark on a similar study to give voice to their issues.

The Church hierarchy has failed to act transparently and consistently in handling the crisis. A need for respectful dialogue/conversations at all levels and for openness and transparency was identified by the interviewees so the Church responds effectively as the crisis continues. Whilst they reported anxieties about the future of the Church, they didn’t report any doubt about the possibility of its ceasing to exist in the future. But they did speak about how it would have to change and become much more accountable than it has perhaps ever been.

MOVING FORWARD

For the six priests I interviewed, and it would seem for priests throughout the world, the relationship between clergy and laity continues to be severely tested. They reported a continuing lack of confidence in dealing with minors as well as a decline in their reputation even though the Catholic Church in England and Wales now has, when compared with other institutions, one of the highest standards of child protection policies and procedures in the country: its 2008 National Safeguarding Policies, the establishment of the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service (CSAS), child protection structures established in every diocese and arrangements for religious congregations to align with either regional religious commissions or with the local diocese. Its policies and procedures

are now appropriately linked to new government arrangements for wider child protection.

This study into the psychological and other effects on non-offending priests indicates it is now time for the Church to recognize and respond to the needs of priests against whom accusations have not been made and whose needs have not previously been recognised or catered for.

‘I’m spiritual but not religious’. No line necessarily divides religion and spirituality. The possible separation between them, the ability to be spiritual and not religious, arose with modernity. This new world culture arose in the West with a gradual acceptance of a plurality of churches in a single location, the separation of religion and state, the plurality of different faiths living together, and finally, as in Europe, the possibility and even a statistical probability of not being religious at all in a social sense. Thus while individual spiritualities can exist without religion, religions cannot exist without spirituality but are precisely the institutionalisation of spirituality. Spirituality is prior to religion, and religion has as its purpose to reflect and support spirituality. When religion fails in this function it loses its reason for being.

– ROGER HAIGHT, *Spiritual and Religious* (Orbis Books/Alban Books) p.6.