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*Andrew McMahon*

# Beyond Redemption?

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Andrew McMahon

'I don't believe these men are beyond redemption'. This was the considered conclusion offered by Liam Dowling, the governor of Dublin's Arbour Hill prison, as he reflected on his experience of those prisoners classified as 'sex offenders' who are undergoing, or have previously completed, rehabilitative programmes within the institution which he oversees. Dowling was one of a range of authoritative voices who contributed to a recent RTE *Would You Believe?* documentary, entitled *Beyond Redemption*.[1] The title itself articulated a reaction regularly encountered in popular discourse, which views those found guilty of sexual offences – and especially of offences against children – as unworthy of anything approaching a fresh start and, indeed, undeserving of meaningful reintegration into mainstream society. This documentary set out, however, seriously to challenge such thinking and argued that while proponents of such popular sentiment would claim to be motivated by a passion to protect children, their eagerness to ostracize offenders did potentially more harm than good and undermined their avowed concern to render their communities safer places for the young.

The central thesis advanced here by the presenter, Mick Peelo, and virtually all of his interviewees was that the more an offender – having undergone punishment and acknowledged and confronted his wrongdoing – could be effectively rehabilitated and restored to some measure of meaningful and purposeful living, the less likelihood there was of his returning to destructive patterns of behaviour and lapsing into re-offending. Consigning the offender to something of a social and psychological wilderness could well, on the other hand, be little more than a recipe for further crimes.

The thesis could hardly be said to be earth-shattering or even particularly novel. Many will have sufficient awareness

1 *Beyond Redemption* - A *Would You Believe? special*. RTE One, Thursday 20 October 2016, 10.15-11.25pm.

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of addiction-recovery programmes and the methodologies of organisations such as *Alcoholics Anonymous*, to know that reliable supports, systems of accountability, opportunities for regular communication and transparency, some feeling of belonging and a renewed sense of overall purpose in life are basics in any growth beyond debilitating and harmful cycles of behaviour. That this should similarly apply to those who have either been guilty of, or who harbour an inclination towards, molesting children or young people is hardly radical thinking. What was important and valuable about this documentary, however, was that it brought together research and experience which coalesced in confirming the theory and an array of contributors who, while seeking in no way to minimize the seriousness and wrongfulness of child sexual abuse, were convinced of the need for Irish society to move beyond tabloid-generated labels of 'beast' and 'monster' and well-worn narratives that presented the offender as so inherently flawed as to be 'beyond redemption'.

Professionals in the field who contributed included Superintendent Michael Daly, Head of An Gárda's SORAM (*Sex Offender Risk Assessment and Management*) teams, responsible for monitoring offenders in the community. As a father himself, Daly expressed empathy with other parents concerned, first and foremost, with the safety of their children, but described the frustration experienced when 'irresponsible media reporting' destabilized months of careful work by SORAM in the resettlement of a sex offender. The Head of the Irish Prison Service's Psychology team, Dr Emma Regan, spoke of the damaging consequences when former offenders were 'destabilized' in the community in this way. Dr Anne Marie McAlinden of Queen's University Belfast's School of Law was insistent that our society needed to get away from the mentality of 'once a sex offender, always a sex offender.' 'Labelling and shaming' was utterly counter-productive, McAlinden argued, as offenders might not be able 'to break free of that.' UCD social scientist and psychotherapist, Dr Marie Keenan, lamented the 'scapegoating, marginalising and driving underground' that was typically experienced by offenders in Ireland today. Illustrative of her concerns was an incident, reported elsewhere in the documentary, where a house in County Wicklow had been set on fire in order to prevent a family occupying it, once it became publicly known that the father of that family had a sexual offence conviction from eighteen years previously.

### INTENTION AND SUPPORT

While professionals working in areas of rehabilitation and offender re-settlement might be expected, to a certain extent, to

offer perspectives broadly sympathetic to those in their charge, this documentary conveyed a remarkably similar message from others whose priority has been, indisputably, the experience and well-being of survivors of abuse. Maeve Lewis was one of the more familiar faces of those interviewed, reflecting the prominence she has been given in the media over many years as Executive Director of *One in Four*, an organisation committed to supporting those who have suffered childhood sexual abuse. Given her background, it was hugely significant to hear Lewis counsel that 'intervention and support' were primarily required when abuse revealed itself in family or community and, she stressed, 'not vilification and ostracization'. It was also highly interesting to hear Lewis explain that her organisation had encountered in the victims of childhood sexual abuse, themselves, the conviction that it was necessary to work constructively with offenders 'if we are to keep children safe'.

The voice of those who had been abused in childhood was represented directly and very movingly by Cormac Walsh. Still clearly struggling with the impact of his ordeal in earlier years, this survivor was prepared nonetheless, by the close of the documentary, to support a rehabilitative approach for those who had offended, providing that they, in turn, were prepared to be honest and contrite in confronting themselves: 'If they are genuinely sorry for what they have done and they accept their faults and want to change then, by all means, give them the help'. Cormac Walsh described how he had been abused by a local band leader in his home town. His account of how a prominent member of the community had exploited him in this way seemed to echo the kind of stories of clergy sexual abuse which have been told to camera so regularly over the past of couple of decades in Ireland. This documentary went out of its way, however, to emphasise that statistically the vast majority of sexual abuse of the young had not been perpetrated by Catholic clergy or religious. That this had to be clarified reflects perhaps, in its own way, an awareness on the part of at least some media professionals that the persistent linking of Catholic Church personnel with child sexual abuse, in public portrayals of the topic down the years, has had the inevitable – and wholly foreseeable – consequence of dangerously distorting and oversimplifying the public's perception of the issue. 'The focus on the Church', suggested Peelo, 'may have been misleading'.

The documentary reiterated the well established, if disturbing, finding that when children suffer sexual abuse, it is highly likely to be at the hands of someone they know within their family circle, neighbourhood or community, or of professionals with whom they come in contact. Much more revealing than this, however,

was the focus in the final part of the documentary on what was reported as the growing incidence of sexual abuse by children within our culture. Almost 40% of those sexually abusing children in Ireland today, the presenter claimed, were children themselves. Something of a case study was presented involving a boy who, at thirteen years of age, was discovered by his mother to have been sexually abusing his eight year old sister. Recounting the trauma that this awareness had visited upon family and household, the mother, 'Yvonne', went on to describe how she got support for her daughter from the CARI Foundation (*Children at Risk in Ireland*) while her son had also been afforded the opportunity to avail himself of appropriate treatment. In accessing this for him, Yvonne had taken the decision to report the boy's abusing to the relevant authorities and a statement was made to Gárdai. What help and rehabilitative processes were available to a child or youth offender, in such circumstances, was sensitively outlined by Dr Joan Cherry, Director of the *Northside Inter-Agency Project*, a Dublin-based community treatment programme for young people who have sexually abused.

This aspect of the documentary was picked up in a comment item in the following day's *Irish Independent*,[2] penned by clinical psychologist Dr Rosaleen McElvaney. McElvaney described how 'International estimates suggest that approximately one third of known sex offenders are adolescents'. Analysing the difficulties experienced by families in addressing such unpalatable realities, McElvaney also drew attention to the difficulties created by media stereotyping and its stranglehold on public discourse: 'Those who abuse children are seen by our society for the most part as deviant, abnormal "perverts". The media portrays such individuals as monsters. What parent would want that for their teenage child? To be shunned as a "paedo".'

Three further participants in *Beyond Redemption* who knew all about the experience of being shunned were 'Tony', 'Jim' and 'Ben'. That they were presented under these pseudonyms, and had their contributions delivered through actors' voices, powerfully expressed their alienation from mainstream society as a result of previous sexual offending. Tony, in reality, appeared to be not that far removed from the kind of teenagers who presumably frequent the *Northside Inter-Agency Project* nowadays. At '18 or 19 years of age', he had begun to abuse a younger female member of his family circle. He lost practically all connection with his family as a consequence of his sexual offences and had served a prison sentence for them. Though technically a free man, Tony came

2 'Sad fact is some child abusers are only children themselves'. Rosaleen McElvaney, *Irish Independent*, Friday 21 October 2016, p.29

across as a thoroughly lonely and isolated figure who felt the need to point out that he was 'still a human being'. Brian Dack, Assistant Director of the Irish Probation Service, pointed out that what was important for men like Tony to remain on the right side of the law, and keep moving forward, was 'having a job, having a purpose'.

'Jim' fell foul of the law by means of internet pornography. This had led him to accessing child pornography. After an initial prison sentence, he returned to an aimless and low-level kind of existence, viewing himself 'as a reprobate'. He reverted to phone sex chat lines, and was soon back to pornography. Eventually he was returned to prison for further child pornography offences. Convinced that his way of living had effectively become 'a way of dying', he was determined to turn his life around and had enrolled in the Arbour Hill sex offenders' programme mentioned previously. Having completed his second sentence, he has returned to life on the outside. However, as presenter Mick Peelo pointed out, 'Jim is effectively living in hiding today' and, devoid of any genuine sense of community or belonging, he lives without drawing much attention to himself. 'I would love to be able to interact and feel normal and human again' concluded Jim.

### ISOLATION

'Ben' was never charged, or convicted of any form of sexual offending. A Catholic missionary priest, he had found himself becoming 'emotionally dependent' upon some of the students in their early 20s whom he was responsible for overseeing, in a missionary setting, during his previous ministry. This led to a number of incidents of what he described as 'inappropriate touching', following which Ben reported himself and his offending behaviour to his superiors. Within a week, Ben found himself 'called out of Africa' and, in the ten years since then, has never been allowed to exercise any form of ministry. He now lives, the documentary claimed, under restrictions which can 'change at any time without warning' and his situation does not appear to be subject to any form of review. 'It's not just about not being in ministry', Ben suggested, 'It's the whole isolation involved.' He has undertaken treatment programmes and believes he has faced many aspects of himself, his sexuality and his behaviour. Convinced that he was being treated unjustly by the ecclesiastical authorities, Ben wondered whether a Church which appeared to be imposing, upon him, such scrutiny and analysis, might not benefit from asking some relevant questions of itself - such as 'Can we learn anything?' or 'Was there something in the organisation which may have contributed to this?' Ben concluded that someone like himself deserves to be seen as 'more than your mistakes' and

experiences his Church as not apparently open to the question 'Is there redemption here?'

Dr Marie Keenan has, in the course of her research and writing over several years, analysed in depth the kinds of questions Ben raises. 'It's like a pendulum has swung', Keenan suggested, as she summarized her perception of the Catholic Church's response to revelations of child sexual abuse within its ranks. The victims of child abuse and their families had been 'greeted with cold disregard' said Keenan, when they had approached Church authorities in former times, whereas those clergy and religious suspected of having abused were nowadays, she believed, the recipients of this 'cold disregard' on the part of their pastoral leaders. 'They are now out of the fold' according to Keenan. Meanwhile, she concluded 'What stays protected in all this, is the institution'.

### PUBLIC OPINION

A Capuchin priest, involved in the supervision of former offenders within his Order, took exception to Marie Keenan's claims of 'cold disregard'. 'The penalty has to fit the crime' proposed Fr Paul Murphy. 'They have abused their role and now, shorn of that role, they can come face to face with themselves and meet themselves as if for the very first time' said Murphy. The Capuchin was convinced that his Order's approach was, in reality, a truly redemptive one. 'They are no longer a role' he explained, referring to those deprived of ministry, 'They are themselves. And that is the stance in which we all have to meet our maker, one day. And we are assisting them to do that.' As an adviser to a support group for Irish priests out of ministry, Marie Keenan did not appear to detect much by way of redemption in the Church's approach to such clergy and seemed unconvinced that there was much by way of meaningful child protection going on either. 'I believe' said Keenan 'that much of the reaction in the Catholic Church is absolutely driven by public opinion and pressure'. 'Of course, there is some awareness and interest in child protection' she continued 'but mostly...the changes, and these arbitrary conditions attached to the men, it's all about public opinion'.

One Christian leader who had not allowed public opinion to dictate his response was Mennonite Pastor, Harry Nigh. The former prison chaplain had been asked, in 1994, by a Canadian prison service psychologist to consider providing support on the outside to a prominent child sexual offender, Charles Taylor, being released after a seven-year sentence. Police warned that they expected Taylor to re-offend within the first month of release. 'I fully expected to be run out of town, that we would be packing up and leaving', explained Nigh, 'Once he re-offended, he would be

taking me with him.' But Nigh responded positively, nonetheless. With the support of some of his congregation, he set up what became known as a 'circle of support and accountability' for the high-risk offender, with the latter being designated its 'core member'. 'Motivated by their faith and their desire to have no more victims', the documentary commented, 'they risked everything'. The risk bore fruit. Not only did Taylor defy police predictions, he never again re-offended and, because of their success with him, the concept of the 'circle of support and accountability' spread further afield. A member of one such circle today, Julie Bender, believed that her involvement with it required 'a faith commitment'. It is, she believed, 'about holding on to the humanity of those who have offended terribly and holding on to the humanity of the people they have abused.' She recalled Jesus' outreach to the lepers of his day and proposed that sexual offenders had become 'the untouchables' of contemporary society.

### 'WE EXCLUDE OR WE EMBRACE'

Detective Wendy Leaver, who had served within the Toronto Police's Sex Crimes Unit, explained her initial cynicism about these 'tree-hugging Christians' and their designs to help criminals like Charles Taylor. She began to attend a local 'circle of support and accountability' so as to observe how former offenders would manipulate those she viewed as their gullible mentors. Chastened by what she actually witnessed unfolding and convinced of its effectiveness, Leaver has become a powerful advocate of 'circles of support' and is active within certain circles herself. Long experienced, through her police work, with the grim reality and the disastrous consequences of sexual offending, she is passionate about the goal of 'no more victims'. 'This is worth turning up for weekly', says Leaver, and every evaluation undertaken, of which she is aware, 'shows that it works.' Harry Nigh, himself, proposes that Christian communities like his have a basic choice to face: 'We exclude or we embrace.'

The documentary went on to describe how 'circles of support and accountability' were now being piloted within Ireland, based on the Canadian Christian model though functioning here, it was pointed out, in a secular setting. Dr Lisa Cuthbert, CEO of PACE (*Prisoners Aid through Community Effort*), explained some of the practical workings of the circles and how, in their functioning, they liaise with statutory bodies, the Probation Service and other relevant agencies. One young woman, 'Tess', spoke about her involvement as a volunteer and of her motivation. She was convinced that political, judicial and media approaches to sexual offenders within Ireland had proven themselves unhelpful.

This was a most significant documentary. It is probably the most substantial piece of work to date, from within the mainstream Irish media, to challenge narratives which have taken hold in recent decades regarding sexual abuse and the sexual abuse of children in particular. It consistently and very credibly challenged the notion that offenders, of any kind, could be 'Beyond Redemption'. At a glance, the documentary's title might have suggested something of a philosophical or theological quandary and could have developed into a theoretical and even lofty discussion. This production's strength lay in its readiness to engage with the daily, practical and often painful realities facing survivor, perpetrator, probation officer, prison governor, police officer, psychotherapist and volunteer alike. Like so many of the figures featured in the course of the work, the documentary was concerned to break cycles of abuse and anxious to discover anything that could help towards a situation of 'no more victims' - a phrase which became something of a mantra in the course of the hour or more of viewing. One suspects that it left many among its audience with a very strong sense that, whatever the concept of 'redemption' might involve, a safer, more wholesome and integrated society for our children and young people required giving offenders some meaningful experience of it, in their various circumstances.

Significant players who came across poorly enough, in the course of the documentary, were the media and the Catholic Church - or, at least, elements of them. Populist, tabloid zeal to 'out' sexual offenders attempting to re-settle in the community, and begin productive lives, looked ultimately as immoral as it was counter-productive. That police, probation, monitoring and rehabilitative services appeared to find their interventions disruptive and undermining of their work, in many ways, said it all. And while they did not come directly under the spotlight here, the fact that 'respectable' media seem to have done so little, in the course of recent decades, to educate the public in the kind of balanced and nuanced way that this documentary managed within seventy minutes suggests, perhaps, a pandering to populism on their part which may warrant further analysis.

Fr Paul Murphy was the only face representing anything close to Catholic Church officialdom in the course of the documentary. While he undoubtedly felt strongly and earnestly about the matters under discussion, his approach came across as unyielding and inflexible. Depriving wrongdoers of roles and freedoms in absolute and indefinite ways might, arguably, prepare them better for final judgement, as he seemed to believe. It was difficult, however, to envisage any of the offenders involved appreciating such helps towards their salvation, however sincerely intended. In fact, it

sounded strangely like the kind of theology that probably helped many a Magdalene laundry prosper in a bygone era in this country. After generations of, at times, cruel and degrading treatment of those considered (sexually-speaking) the offenders and outcasts of former times, the Catholic Church and its personnel should be wary, nowadays, of construing what might be little more than a punitive regime, and an abuse of rights, as a spiritually edifying venture. History has not, inevitably, been kind to them for attempting this in the past and many, many people have suffered because of it.

No one from the Catholic Church's *National Board for Safeguarding Children* featured in *Beyond Redemption*, but its current head, Mrs Theresa Devlin, was reported as commenting on issues it raised in a pre-transmission news item in the *Irish Catholic* newspaper.[3] At first sight, Theresa Devlin appears to be on the same side as many of those who contributed to the documentary, remarking how 'By caring for the accused you are safeguarding children.' Emphasising that those who have been accused must cooperate with Church management plans, Mrs Devlin explains: 'The Church should work and care for and support those who have been accused and against whom there is a credible accusation...as long as they will work with them'. Dr Marie Keenan is familiar with the circumstances of many of those who have been accused, in recent years, and who are presumably subject to Catholic Church 'management plans'. She told Mick Peelo, in the course of the documentary, that their 'social isolation' and 'emotional isolation' were of major concern to her. Perhaps a survey could be undertaken among those currently out of ministry because of accusations, across Irish dioceses and congregations, to see whether Devlin's or Keenan's grasp of things comes closer to the reality of what is actually going on, for these clergy, by way of on-going Church care and support.

Elsewhere in the *Irish Catholic* piece, Mrs Devlin is reported as being dismissive of suggestions that the institution is putting itself first in all of this: 'Denying that the policies are intended to protect the Church, she said they are based on extensive research and consultations with survivors, convicted abusers and Church bodies.' Perhaps. The Church's Safeguarding Board will, undoubtedly, have their own sources for advice and guidance, but this documentary left one with the distinct impression that, while professionals in a variety of relevant fields are cohering around the concept of 'redemptive' possibilities for those who have offended, the Catholic Church remains on something of a limb in wedding itself, so zealously, to what this documentary characterised as its

3 'Offenders must not return to ministry – safeguarding head'. Greg Daly, *The Irish Catholic*, Thursday 20 October 2016, p.4.

'zero tolerance' approach. This must inevitably raise questions, from a purely professional perspective, as to the focus and overall worth of the Church's 'management plans' for offenders. It should also invite some fairly urgent soul-searching on the part of an organisation which would seek to present as its very raison-d'etre the redemption of sinful mankind.

Whatever about offenders, moreover, the inflexibility of the Catholic Church's policies appears to be as real for those accused as for those convicted. Theresa Devlin outlined the background to this position in the *Irish Catholic* report: Where there is 'some semblance of truth to the allegation' she said 'it is critical that the Church comes in with a safety plan and it is critical that that plan, if the allegation is credible, does not include ministry.' She points out that 'the State does very little, particularly when there's no criminal prosecution'. While most of us would want to consider ourselves as committed as Theresa Devlin to safeguarding the young, many will believe it only proper that the State should do 'very little', as she puts it, in such circumstances. Civilized democracies look to the rule of law and are generally reluctant to intervene in the lives and liberties of citizens who have not been found guilty of an offence. The Catholic Church should have been slow to move away from this tried and tested convention. Their doing so, in more recent years, has been dogged with difficulties of which Theresa Devlin and her colleagues cannot be unaware.

Marie Keenan, elaborating upon these issues elsewhere, has cautioned against complacency on the part of the Irish Church, its leadership and its safeguarding specialists, in respect of the overall effectiveness of its current processes and she believes their limitations should not remain unaddressed. Keenan writes:

> If the new practices and protocols have improved the response to the problem at one level, they have created others at another level. The chief casualties of the new situation are the clergy themselves, the relationships between bishops and priests and the rights of Catholic clergy who are falsely accused. It is always important that organisations take extreme care in managing systemic change, as change in one part of the system will produce changes in all others, raising the potential for unforeseen problems in the attempt to resolve the original problem. This is exactly what is happening now in the Catholic Church.[4]

Dr Keenan published the above remarks as part of her landmark

4 Keenan, M. *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture* (Oxford, 2011) p.229

study of the Catholic Church's approach to child sexual abuse and its perpetrators, this time five years ago. One gets the impression that her work has not been given the place it deserves in dialogue and reflection within the Irish Church around these critical and complex issues. The *Would You Believe?* team, through this recent documentary, have raised some very pertinent questions, again, for both the Catholic Church here and for the wider society which that Church inhabits and seeks to influence. One hopes that the challenges raised by this latest production will be neither ignored nor summarily dismissed by leaders within the Church, or within that wider society. In airing their documentary at this time, RTE has offered the Irish Catholic community, clerical and lay, a most important resource for its reflection – particularly apt for a Church which has been, supposedly, spending the past year struggling with the demands and implications of living a gospel of mercy.

**Heroism.** The drama of heroism raises above all the issue of physical and moral courage: Does the hero have, in extreme circumstances, the courage to obey – to perform the task, the sacrifice, the resistance, the pilgrimage that he is called on to perform? The drama of ordinary or daily behaviour also raises the issue of courage, but it raises at the same time the issue of skill; and, because ordinary behaviour lasts so much longer than heroic action, it raises in a more complex and difficult way the issue of perseverance. It may, in some ways, be easier to be Samson than to be a good husband or wife day after day for fifty years.

– Wendell Berry, 'The Gift of Good Land', *A New Creation,* ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Crossroad) p.324.