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Barry O'Sullivan

Giving People
the Confidence
to have Difficult
Conversations

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Giving People the Confidence to have Difficult Conversations

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It is as if all are respecting an invisible sign on the wall that says: ‘In this group, we will not discuss sex, race, sexual orientation, death, abuse, rage, religion, class, shame, guilt, mental illness, disability, substance abuse, fears of all kinds, angry reactions to the worker or other members, or any other subjects that would simultaneously make the work of the group real but also painful and frightening for the members and the leader(s). Violation of these rules may result in social isolation or even exclusion from the group.

Lawrence Shulman (2002, pp. 139-140)

In my nearly 20 years of talking to fellow priests about safeguarding and child sex abuse, one statistic stands out. It is not the number of children affected, priests I have talked to or Roman Catholic meetings and conferences I have addressed. It is the number of responses I get to my standard request to my clergy audiences: Raise your hand if you have never had a meaningful conversation about how to deal with child sex abuse. Without exception, in every group every priest raises a hand.

For the great majority of Roman Catholic priests, and most likely for clergy of other faiths as well, child sex abuse is simply taboo, a difficult conversation best avoided – Lawrence Shulman’s ‘invisible sign’ seems to hang on the walls of our churches. I was in fact afraid it might be too difficult a conversation for the Roman Catholic Church when I first sought the support of my then bishop, Rt Rev. Terence Brain, now Emeritus Bishop of Salford, for me to undertake doctoral research into the effects of the clergy child sex abuse crises on non-offending priests (see *The Furrow*, June 2016). But both he and his successor, the current Bishop of Salford Rt Rev. John Arnold, strongly supported my research. Despite this support, and despite various Vatican pronouncements in favour of a more open approach to the crises and child safeguarding, I still faced the possibility that this taboo would be insurmountable for the priests I would interview for my research. Would it be too

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difficult for them to talk freely and frankly with me, a parish priest they did not know? It was not: they all spoke openly about how the crises had affected them.

Their discussions and the many subsequent Church conferences I have attended to discuss my research reveal a willingness among priests to overcome the taboo. Yet my request to all these conferences, both in England and Wales and internationally, still elicits rooms full of raised hands. Many priests, in common with countless others, continue to be uncomfortable holding difficult conversations, especially about taboo subjects.

Whether we are aware of it, we decide what topics are to be ignored, denied, discounted or examined at our peril. Quite often topics that are taboo receive only superficial treatment, perhaps because they provoke anxiety, discomfort and confusion. Taboo subjects by their very nature can be threatening and for many people, including priests and others in the global Roman Catholic community, they are to be avoided. But regardless of how uncomfortable or difficult discussions about some taboo subjects may be, they ought to be explored because they can have a toxic effect on individuals, groups and communities. Discussing them encourages our awareness of the complex, messy situations that occur in real life, and how we respond to them.

The readiness to hold these difficult conversations must not only encompass myths, taboos and uncomfortable topics, but also our own presumptions and our ways of thinking about these issues and 'taken for granted' certainties. This must be part of a life-long strategy to constantly challenge and be open, especially about subjects that we find most uncomfortable.

Unless relevant taboo subjects are explored, discussed and sometimes challenged, the culture of any given group will be unable to change and evolve. For priests, counsellors and others responsible for safeguarding children throughout the Catholic community, and for those responsible for facilitating training to prevent child sexual abuse, having the confidence to have difficult conversations is vital. As Shulman (2002, p. 143) says: 'We need to learn how to use our feelings, not lose our feelings.'

My experiences with victims and offenders alike indicates that taboos such as that associated with child sex abuse have a significant impact on individuals, on relationships between two people, on the dynamics within a group, and on training people to work with those affected by a taboo. The more people who work with children are able to open up to new areas, and explore the feelings that come with them, the more their ability to address taboo areas will increase. Whenever I have introduced the taboo subject of child sex abuse, I have observed resistance on the part

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of the individual or the group, as well as heightened defensiveness, denial, anger and increased avoidance. However, it is clear from the extensive library of psychological research and from my own experiences from three decades as a parish priest, five years as a prison chaplain and especially nearly two decades of child safeguarding in the Roman Catholic Church that the determination of priests, counsellors or safeguarding officers to persist and to send the message that they are willing and able to confront a particularly sensitive issue will in turn give victims, families, parishioners and others the confidence to engage in the process. With certain taboo topics there cannot be any change or growth without discomfort and pain. But these feelings can be overcome if those attempting to resolve issues understand what is required and develop the confidence to have difficult conversations.

THE NATURE OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Conversations are an integral part of our experience and interpretation of our perceived reality, and difficult conversations are even more important since the failure to engage in them can mean that we miss the opportunity to engage with a challenging aspect of reality. It might be the key to experiencing a reality without which we would remain, at least in part, in the dark. Whilst protected from the challenge, we remain couched in ignorance.

Difficult conversations raise many issues. For example, should the other person(s) be confronted with interpretations of themselves, especially if they have not asked for them and may not appreciate exploring areas which have not been previously negotiated. When difficult issues are raised, this will often lead to disagreement which in turn raises the question of the power dynamic between those having the conversation and by implication whose interpretation of reality informs the outcome. When broaching any subject which will lead to a difficult conversation I have found it is important to consider who initiates the dialogue. Whilst a client in therapy may want and be entitled to therapeutic conversations to facilitate insight and enable change, in many circumstances in which a priest can find himself difficult conversations can lead to new interpretations which parishioners, victims or their families have not sought and might not welcome.

Before a conversation, difficult or otherwise, takes place it is therefore important to bear in mind the principles of noted American humanist psychologist Carl Rogers who advocates upholding the intrinsic dignity of the people who are engaging in the conversations in order to strengthen the individual rather than intervene in his or her life. Rogers reminds us that individuals have within themselves vast abilities to understand and alter themselves.

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Rogers argues that three conditions must be met to facilitate growth in any conversation in which the development of the person is the goal: 'genuineness' or 'congruence' – the more those who initiate difficult conversations are themselves, the greater the likelihood that the other participants will change; 'unconditional positive regard' which requires the participants to recognise what is going on at any given time – confusion, resentment, fear, anger, relief, enlightenment – so they value each other in their totality rather than in a conditional way; and 'empathic understanding' – those who facilitate the conversations interpret the feelings and personal meanings that the others are experiencing and communicate this back to them. Integral to his approach is 'sensitive active listening' which he says is the most potent force for change (Rogers, 1959). This change occurs as a result of people feeling they are being accepted and prized and are worthy to be listened to, something I found particularly relevant in meeting victims who had been sexually abused as children. These principles help to establish a degree of rapport because, for a conversation to have any worth, there should be a genuine interest in the individual and a respect for what that person brings to the dynamic. I have used these principles to overcome reluctance and unease among priests at countless conferences and to assure the priests participating in my research that their contributions and opinions were valuable, would be respected and would remain anonymous.

OVERCOMING INITIAL OBSTACLES

However, all priests have encountered real world situations in which principles sometimes must be compromised. For example, in therapy or counselling it is an important principle to ascertain whether there is any dissatisfaction with a difficult topic and whether a resulting change will be welcome. However in training such as that for priests and others in the Church who are taking on child safeguarding duties or working as prison chaplains, the fact that it may or may not be welcome is important information, but it should not determine whether the conversation takes place. This is especially so when an intervention is deemed necessary by a third party who gives clear instructions to challenge and enlighten individuals who have neither asked for nor will likely welcome the intervention and who may resent the challenge.

This can have serious implications for the continuing relationships of those involved, such as priests with parishioners or Safeguarding Co-ordinators with those they are responsible for training. It is therefore necessary to consider how free expression is to be encouraged, how interpretations may be made during a conversation, who sets the agenda, who sets the pace at which

things will be discussed, who decides when the discussion is over and who interprets the interaction. It is particularly important to consider the extent to which an individual or a group is not only given permission to participate but encouraged to do so in an honest and open manner. Prof. John McLeod of the Institute for Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy in Dublin (2001) suggests the adoption of a 'process consent' procedure which he argues will deal with the immediate moral dilemmas arising from the intensity of a conversation.

Other factors in difficult conversations are the extent to which those involved are ready for change and what happens if they get stuck in that process. I encountered this in my research interviews with non-offending priests who struggled to reconcile their loyalty to brother priests accused of abuse and their belief that these offenders should be accountable for their actions. Whilst they deserved imprisonment, their imprisonment in turn engendered a feeling of sympathy and confusion amongst the non-offending priests I spoke to. 'I couldn't comprehend why a brother priest would do this,' said one priest.

To move past such quandaries, it is helpful to assess a person's readiness for change. Mearns and Thorne (2013) suggest five factors: indecision about wanting to change; general lack of trust in others; unwillingness to take responsibility for self in life; unwillingness to take responsibility in the changing process; unwillingness to recognise and explore feelings about change. They argue that whilst none of these prevent change, they may lengthen or shorten the process because individuals are in their own place moving at their own speed. Seeking too much change too fast may derail the whole process, so I have found it is valuable to understand why people become stuck on issues, whether they really are stuck or just moving in an unexpected direction, what they think of their current dilemma, what caused it, does it matter and how can they move on.

These questions are integral when trying to give people the confidence to have difficult conversations. There are many reasons for getting stuck, including experiencing significant movement in perception or insight from which there is no going back whilst at the same time realising that going on may lead to considerable unalterable and unwelcome life changes. If the conversation is stuck, it is imperative that a person should be encouraged to pause if only to gather energy and motivation to deal with the difficult issues ahead. Any challenge which leads to dramatic change in difficult conversations must allow people to integrate the changes, especially when the subject is a taboo and even more importantly when the person leading the change is a member of a society or

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community in which that particular issue is a deeply engrained taboo. The priests in my research, while sometimes uncomfortable, welcomed the opportunity to engage with this taboo subject and unanimously found our discussions to be ultimately cathartic.

SILENCE AND SHAME

Another obstacle in a difficult conversation is what to do when there is no conversation. When one attempts to discuss a taboo, a common response is silence. Although group and individual silences can sometimes be constructive, some silences can lead to difficulties, producing negative effects on the group and its members. Techniques for dealing with them run the gamut from raising a diversionary topic to reduce anxiety, to asking groups or individuals to discuss what the silence means. Silence is most often caused by members being frightened and uncomfortable in the presence of the conversation facilitator. Some silences can be exhausting as the energy required to sustain them can be greater than the energy required to participate (Lewis, 1977).

Daring to have difficult conversations will invariably involve a measure of discomfort; this is not a reason to avoid them as discomfort can sometimes lead to new insights. The difficulty is striking a balance between challenging attitudes and leaving individuals or groups feeling totally overwhelmed. If individuals simply refuse to speak there is very little that a priest or facilitator can do to make them discuss something they do not want to discuss. One strategy is to change the topic in the hope of temporarily relieving the tension. However this is only a short-term approach and does nothing to address the underlying problem. When an individual or group feels threatened, it is imperative to be mindful of the very delicate balance between fostering insight and causing the taboo to be even further ingrained. In most circumstances, individuals and groups retain the right to disengage at any time during the process. Taboos are there for a reason and no matter how passionate a facilitator feels about the subject, it is imperative to remember that people have the right not to be challenged and, if they choose, to maintain a taboo with all it entails. Whilst it is important to have difficult conversations, I am in no doubt that it would be unethical to push people beyond boundaries and into an area which exceeds their capability to cope and would therefore leave them more damaged than when the difficult conversation began.

When addressing any taboo, the primary accompanying emotion is invariably shame. In itself, shame is simply a normal human emotion which can indicate either an action or thought which is inappropriate. It can serve to remind us of our boundaries. However,

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once a taboo is introduced, the type of shame experienced is likely to be toxic. Toxic shame is an integral part of the shame which accompanies sexual abuse and especially child sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse often triggers a particularly pervasive form of shame. Having worked as a counsellor with victims of sexual abuse for nearly two decades, I have witnessed first-hand the toxic shame they have experienced. This shame is compounded for victims who have stated that the greatest shame was not the actual sexual abuse but the fact that in part it was 'enjoyable' physiologically and, perhaps more damaging, psychologically and emotionally because the attention they received made them feel 'special'. Only after extensive in-depth therapy were victims able to appreciate that this was part of an elaborate grooming process adopted by perpetrators.

LAUNCHING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

From 1995 to 1999, whilst working as a prison chaplain, I served as a tutor in the Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) then being run in 28 English and Welsh prisons. Due to the sensitive and sometimes gruesome content of the disclosures by the programme's inmates, an integral part of its tutor training was to foster an understanding of taboos including taboos within ourselves. At the start of the training course, we were informed that if there was a road we were not prepared to travel down then we should leave the course. Due to the extraordinarily sensitive information we would encounter, inmates would pick up and exploit any hesitancy to deal with the subject and this would neutralise the process. This also applies to holding difficult conversations about taboos such as child sexual abuse where it is imperative that facilitators are able to walk a road down which a child has been taken, especially when that journey has led to horrific abuse. Victims are much more likely to disclose what has happened to them and begin their healing process if the person they are disclosing to does not flinch when hearing about such atrocities.

In nearly two decades of safeguarding within the Roman Catholic Church, I have seen that the sexual abuse of children in our faith communities and the feeling of not knowing what to do forces some priests to freeze in their ministry with children. For some priests it undermines their confidence in their own competence and they avoid discussions and training in a taboo area that makes them feel most uncomfortable. They ignore, deny or simply refuse to discuss the issue and sadly some clergy prefer to labour under the burden of not knowing rather than to face a taboo which is having a detrimental effect on their overall ministry as priests.

Ironically, however, now whenever I meet a fellow priest or a

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small group of priests the conversation invariably comes round to child abuse and my connected role within the Church. This indicates growing willingness not merely to acknowledge the taboo but also to engage with it. It is increasingly necessary therefore that they have the confidence and ability to have difficult conversations. This, however, leaves open the question of how difficult conversations and training about taboos can be successful if they are mandatory. Can change, other than superficial change, ever take place in the absence of a substantial therapeutic alliance and adherence to the Rogerian core conditions which revolve around voluntary participation? To encourage priests, child safeguarding officials and others to develop the confidence to have difficult conversations about the taboo of child sexual abuse, the Catholic Church can offer training programmes. But difficult conversations will always be seriously impaired and may prove counter-productive if the self-worth and intrinsic dignity of participants are not respected. Considerable effort should therefore be made at the preparatory stages of a difficult conversation or training so everyone wants to participate rather than being required to do so.

The priests I talked to in my doctoral research and at countless diocesan and other discussions on safeguarding children may have been encouraged by their superiors to participate; but all ultimately agreed voluntarily to share their views and their feelings in what many openly admitted was a most difficult conversation about a previously unexplored taboo. I have had many other difficult conversations with the victims of clerical abusers, with offenders including offending clergy and with the families of both groups. Conducting all of these difficult conversations is essential to enable the Roman Catholic Church and all faith groups to deal with this and all taboo subjects effectively so the 'invisible sign' no longer hangs over our churches.

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Listening aids self-awareness. Being listened to helps a person observe and regard himself anew. This observing may cast more light on costly habits and on negative patterns, inner and/or outer: patterns of thinking, feeling, and rigid moulds in the memory; patterns of attitude and mindset; patterns of reaction, behaviour and relating. Hearing one's feelings and reflections spoken aloud – and accepted and reflected back by another person – enables worries, some of which may be deep seated and long held, to rise to the surface.

– ROBIN DANIELS, *Listening* (Marston/Instant Apostle) p.29.