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*Aoife McGrath*

Thinking  
Pastorally about  
'Me Too'

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# Thinking Pastorally about ‘Me Too’

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Aoife McGrath

Reviewers of 2017 have proclaimed it ‘an extraordinary 12 months for women.’<sup>1</sup> It began with U.S. women’s marches in protest of the Trump presidency and in support of women’s rights, with sister marches held in solidarity in Ireland and on every continent around the world.<sup>2</sup> It closed with *Time* magazine naming the ‘silence-breakers’ – women and men who spoke out against sexual abuse and harassment – ‘person of the year.’<sup>3</sup> These silence breakers worked within about a dozen different industries, but the stories they shared had a familiar form that resonated with people worldwide: they described ‘the vulgarity of the harassment itself – years of lewd comments, forced kisses, opportunistic gropes – but also the emotional and psychological fallout from those advances.’<sup>4</sup> Their courage in voicing their experiences was instrumental in what some have described as a change in culture, whereby harassment is no longer viewed as being acceptable, especially in the workplace, and there is ‘a willingness to hold even beloved and powerful men accountable for past misdeeds’:

They’ve had it with men who use their power to take what they want from women. These silence breakers have started a revolution of refusal, gathering strength by the day, and in the past two months alone, their collective anger has spurred immediate and shocking results: nearly every day, CEOs have

- 1 Harriet Marsden, ‘Review of the year: the female groundbreakers of 2017,’ *The Independent* (26 December 2017).
- 2 Women protested in anger that a man who had made misogynistic remarks about women prior to and during his candidacy had been elevated to the highest office, including that well-publicised instance when he boasted about kissing women and grabbing them by the genitals, because ‘when you’re a star they let you do it.’ David A. Fahrenthold, ‘Trump recorded having extremely lewd conversation about women in 2005,’ *The Washington Post* (08 October 2016).
- 3 Stephanie Zacharek, Eliana Dockterman, and Haley Sweetland Edwards, ‘Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers,’ *Time* (06 December 2017).
- 4 *Ibid.*

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been fired, moguls toppled, icons disgraced. In some cases, criminal charges have been brought.<sup>5</sup>

These silence breakers form part of a movement that has no formal name, but might be at least partially captured by the ‘Me Too’ campaign and its social media equivalent #MeToo, which has been translated, and adapted, around the world, for instance into French (#BalanceTonPorc), Spanish (#YoTambién), Italian (#QuellaVoltaChe), Arabic (#Ana\_kaman), and many others languages.<sup>6</sup> These online forums have enabled women (and men) worldwide to face and own their personal experiences of sexual harassment, exploitation, abuse, and violence, whether they publicly name those to blame for the harmful behaviour or simply utter ‘me too’.

Online forums have also encouraged men, and in particular those exercising power and authority, to ‘check their privilege,’ to self-evaluate their behaviour, and to recognise and address the harmful behaviour of others. Such behaviour can range from once-off/serial instances of verbal or physical conduct that cause offence, humiliation, or harm to another, to the actual or threatened physical and sexual intrusion by force or coercion on a person, i.e. against his or her will. The former types of behaviour have proven to be the most contentious: while few (if any) would defend rape or abuse, many and more might defend unintentional offence or harm (‘I was only having a laugh’ or ‘I thought she might take it as a compliment’). In addition, many dispute that such behaviour can implicitly perpetuate a dominative or manipulative culture that leads to the sexual objectification or the diminishment of women.

The following is a brief reflection on the movement, as viewed through the lens of the ‘me too’ campaign, written from a pastoral theological perspective. As with any pastoral theological reflection, it is useful to name ‘key issues’ that are critical within the topic under reflection. For me, there are several, though the list I provide is in no way exhaustive. In this context, a brief exposition of certain pastoral theological insights has some relevance. These insights comprise the following:

a) the need to enter into the situation of others, and attend to them in their particularity, through active listening and empathic imagination;

5 Ibid.

6 Social media users can create and use ‘hashtags’ when posting messages on social media platforms. They do this by placing the number sign # (also known as the hash character) in front of a word, or an unspaced phrase. Searching for that hashtag within a platform (like Twitter, or Facebook) will yield an archive of all messages that have been that have that have been posted using that ‘hashtag’.

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- b) the significance of exercising a solidarity that is a firm commitment to the good of all and of each individual, that means engaging with others on a deep level and accompanying victims/survivors on their journey of healing, recognising the mutual relationship that is involved, which is necessary for authentic dialogue to take place between persons and communities;
- c) the necessary collaboration between women and men as co-creators and agents of change within society, which forms part of a time-consuming, emergent process involving self-reflection, going out of one's comfort zone, and making a fundamental commitment to pursue a more just and equal society for the benefit of all.

Firstly, let me provide some background information to provide a context for these key issues and accompanying pastoral insights.

### A LITTLE BIT OF CONTEXT

The 'Me Too' campaign was originally launched in 2006 by Tarana Burke, founder and director of the non-profit organisation Just Be Inc.<sup>7</sup> The focus of the movement was on young women who have endured sexual abuse, assault, or exploitation, with a particular concern for 'young women of colour from low wealth communities.' The vision of the movement was to 'turn victims into survivors': to guide them through a healing process, by reaching out to them and building up their awareness and understanding that they are not alone. The primary approach to healing was thereby one of 'survivors' reaching out and sharing their own personal stories (and paths to healing), to empower others through empathy. The movement also values the importance of education, and provides resources for use in schools, community groups, and youth organisations.

The catalyst for the elevation of this movement to global consciousness was the Harvey Weinstein scandal.<sup>8</sup> News first broke on 5 October 2017, when *The New York Times* reported allegations of inappropriate conduct, unwanted physical contact, and sexual harassment by the Hollywood producer against many women.<sup>9</sup> The report claimed that Weinstein had created a 'toxic working environment' for women through three decades of inappropriate sexual advances. As the scandal unfolded, more and more women came forward with accusations of rape and sexual harassment against Weinstein. In reaction to these reports, actress

7 See <http://justbeinc.wixsite.com/justbeinc/the-me-too-movement-c7cf>

8 'Harvey Weinstein timeline: How the scandal unfolded,' *BBC News* (20 December 2017).

9 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, 'Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,' *The New York Times* (5 October 2017).

Alyssa Milano posted a message on Twitter saying, 'If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet.'<sup>10</sup> The tweet quickly went viral, with first thousands, then millions, of women from across the world replying 'me too,' and sharing their experiences of rape, sexual assault, and harassment across social media platforms, many voicing their stories for the first time. Milano's personal reaction to this rapid evolution of the 'me too' responses has been echoed many times by participants within the movement: 'My hope is people will get the idea of the magnitude, of just how many people have been affected by this in the world, in our lifetimes, in this country. ...The most important thing that it did was to shift the conversation away from the predator and to the victim.'<sup>11</sup>

The hashtag '#metoo' now chronicles the personal stories of harassment, abuse, and violence against women worldwide. It has also become the fulcrum for feminist debate on topics such as sexism, the sexual objectification of women, male privilege, and the gender pay gap. Social media users employ related hashtags when contributing to the online debate, such as #notallmen, #yesallwomen (both of which became popular in May 2014), #everydaysexism, #rapeculture, #victimblaming, and most recently #timesup.

The last hashtag represents an extension of the 'metoo' movement that has a particular focus on workplace harassment and abuse. It developed as a direct consequence of the growing number of celebrities within the entertainment industry (and other public figures) who have been accused of sexual misconduct after the Harvey Weinstein allegations.<sup>12</sup> The #timesup campaign represents a 'unified call for change from women in entertainment for women everywhere,' and is shorthand for saying 'the clock has run out on sexual assault, harassment and inequality in the workplace. It's time to do something about it.'<sup>13</sup> A significant element of this campaign is the creation of a legal defence fund to subsidise legal support for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or related retaliation in the workplace, as a means of empowering these individuals to hold 'wrongdoers accountable' and address 'systematic inequality and injustice in the workplace'.<sup>14</sup>

10 Alyssa Milano, 'Status update,' *Twitter* (15 October 2017), see [https://twitter.com/Alyssa\\_Milano/status/919659438700670976](https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976)

11 Leanne Italic, 'Me Too: Alyssa Milano elevates Harvey Weinstein conversation,' *Associated Press News* (18 October 2017).

12 Samantha Cooney, 'Here Are All the Public Figures Who've Been Accused of Sexual Misconduct After Harvey Weinstein,' *Time* (15 Jan 2018, originally published 09 Nov 2017).

13 See <https://www.timesupnow.com/#into-anchor>

14 *Ibid.*

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### SOME INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

On the one hand, the social media manifestation of the ‘me too’ campaign is viewed by many as a means of empowering those who have experienced sexual harassment, violence, or exploitation, giving voice to those who have otherwise been silenced, and generating awareness of the magnitude and prevalence of this issue worldwide. They believe it contributes positively to society’s perception and treatment of women, by challenging the status quo and breaking down the power structures that bolster systemic sexism in differing cultural contexts.

However, for others, it has descended into an instrument of public shaming or ‘calling out’ of (alleged) perpetrators with the goal of seeking some form of accountability (‘sufficient atonement’ or, perhaps, ‘retribution’) for their actions, perpetuating the ‘heads must roll’ philosophy.

Where some see the intention to support and stand in solidarity with the victim, who is viewed as speaking ‘truth to power,’ others see a risk of eroding the presumption of innocence, the alienation (even hatred) of men, the normalisation of conformity, and its corollary, the demonisation of dissent. While some view the movement as turning ‘victims’ into ‘survivors’, others believe either that it is actually ‘accusers’ who are being heralded as ‘survivors’, or that women are being portrayed as perpetual victims and reduced to mere objects of male desire, rather than being recognised as sexually liberated, free agents who can adequately fend off unwanted sexual advances

The tendency to trivialise the experiences of victims/survivors, to reduce rape, abuse, and harassment to locker-room banter or awkward seductive techniques, or to blame the victim for the harm that befell them is abhorrent to one side. On another, suggesting that there is such a thing as a ‘rape culture,’ where attitudes of gender and sexuality are normalised in society, leading to sexually-predatory behaviour by men, and making all men collectively guilty for the transgressions of other men, is equally abhorrent.

### THE ‘HEART OF THE MATTER’

First, the traumatic and harmful experiences that comprise the focus of the movement, and the women (and men) who have experienced such trauma/harm, are too quickly side-lined. The danger is that it becomes more about witnessing the public demise of the accused, or debating ideas – such as ‘oppression,’ ‘equality,’ ‘feminism,’ ‘gender justice,’ ‘freedom of speech’, and ‘truth’ – than about giving voice to, and attending to, the lived reality of many women (and men) who experience sexual harassment and abuse.

Second, the support or ‘solidarity’ shown by others to victims/

survivors is at risk of being merely perfunctory or noncommittal, and ultimately ineffective as a means for enabling the healing process, if limited to once-off /short-term public displays of togetherness. Furthermore, the movement may prove more divisive than unitive, as discord materialises within online forums and media coverage. This disharmony is not just between women and men, but also among women. Since this debate is played out in mass media, especially social media, debates often become quickly polarised, with righteous indignation on all sides.

Finally, there is a great risk that the ‘revolution of refusal’, with its persuasive and (at times) coercive approach to effect equality and justice within society, which is employed by some of the movement’s own advocates, will ultimately undermine its desired goal to bring about such change. In reality, it may damage/impede relationships, destroy trust, and forfeit the voluntary commitment that is necessary for authentic solidarity. Similarly, the rational-empirical approach – whereby knowledge and rational argument are understood as the primary movers of change – which is used by those ‘engaging with’ or critiquing the movement, may be premature, and consequently prove ineffective for persuading others of the validity of counter-arguments. The mutual search for truth and fairness, which is an essential part of authentic dialogue, comes after one has dealt with one’s own initial reactions to the other, and attempted to transcend these in order to attend to and understand the other ‘at the level of their experience and perspective’, and to build trust and mutual respect. Intellectual bullying, subtle manipulation, and aggressive defensiveness all make it impossible for any conversation to reach the stage of a mutual search for truth and fairness ‘at the level of ideas.’ These qualities also impede a person’s capacity to be affected by the other and to effect the other, both of which are necessary for genuine and fruitful communication to occur.

#### ATTENDING TO THE OTHER

From the pastoral theological perspective, the disposition and practice of attentiveness is paramount when encountering others. Attending to others in their particularity opens up the possibility of a meaningful interpersonal relationship with them.<sup>15</sup> The nature of this attentiveness is that it ‘considers the other “in a certain sense as one with ourselves”.’<sup>16</sup> Such attentiveness ‘is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek

15 Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 34.

16 Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (2013), §199, quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, S. Th., II-II, q. 27, a. 2.

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their good.<sup>17</sup> To attend adequately to the other, one must listen respectfully and compassionately to him/her, with ‘an openness of heart’ that makes the closeness of a genuine encounter possible.<sup>18</sup> In addition, empathic imagination is required to enter into the other’s situation: i.e. ‘imaginatively stepping into the shoes of another person and seeing the world from his or her perspective.’<sup>19</sup> However, true attentiveness to another person is not an easy task. Henri Nouwen suggests:

...it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it.<sup>20</sup>

Many women within the ‘me too’ movement have appealed to men to simply listen to the voices that have until now been silent/silenced and, by doing so, to increase their awareness and understanding of the breadth and depth of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence against women. This speaks to me of the victims/survivors innate desire for others to attend respectfully and compassionately to them in their particularity, so that there can be a genuine encounter, and deeper understanding reached about their traumatic experience(s).

This insight may help to situate the anger that some men feel is unfairly directed at them, which leads them to be defensive and prevents them from engaging in real conversation; such anger reflects a hurt that lingers from the place of vulnerability and brokenness brought about by the victim/survivor’s initial (or even ongoing) trauma. Hans Zollner suggests that when one’s psychological, emotional, and cognitive faculties cannot deal with the trauma one has experienced, it becomes split off and put in a fridge, where it continues to smolder until that time when it is taken out and again goes on fire.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, even if the person’s trauma occurred some years previously, the emotive response might still be raw. The appeal for men to listen thus implies the need to ‘stay with’ victims/survivors in their suffering, rather than to flee from it – perhaps to the safety of a rational or dispassionate discussion ‘at

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., §171.

19 Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 18.

20 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 25.

21 Hans Zollner, ‘Formation in Safeguarding in Seminary and Religious Training: Spiritual and Practical Aspects’ (paper presented at the *Models of Priestly Formation: Assessing the Past, Reflecting on the Present and Imagining the Future: An International Symposium, Maynooth*, 16-18 November 2017).



the level of ideas' concerning equality, justice, truth, etc. Through attending to the victims/survivors and entering into the experiences they have shared, we should be inspired to demonstrate true concern for them, and genuinely to seek their good, without attempting to cure them or their situation.

SOLIDARITY, ACCOMPANIMENT, AND AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE

There have been various visible manifestations of solidarity thus far in this movement: for example, women marched alongside one another in support of women's rights; women and men celebrities and activists choose to wear black to the Golden Globe awards ceremony as a symbol of oneness; and, women (and men) shared personal stories of harassment, abuse, or violence to indicate to other victims that they are not alone, and to encourage them to speak out about their experiences. Such actions may be small, and yet they propelled this issue onto a global stage. The creation of a legal defence fund to subsidise legal support for victims by the #timesup campaign is an expression of solidarity in the sense of empowering others to hold wrongdoers accountable.

Theologically, solidarity is 'about engaging with people at a deep level and is fundamentally different from the giving of material aid which is obviously good and necessary... the first effort to give aid commits a person at a deeper level ...and becomes an ongoing process and not a contribution. In other words, the giver too is changed in a way that is radical and ongoing.'<sup>22</sup> The key is in recognising the interdependence of the relationship, and the mutual giving and receiving that is involved. Ultimately, authentic solidarity realises that 'we are all really responsible for all.'<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, solidarity requires a firm commitment to engage with victims/survivors at a deep level, which means not merely reaching out in empathy so that the healing may begin, but rather accompanying victims/survivors on their journey of healing. In accompanying others, we invite them 'to let themselves be healed'; '[o]ur personal experience of being accompanied and assisted, and of openness to those who accompany us' teaches us about the mutual giving and receiving that is involved in this accompaniment, and it enables us 'to be patient and compassionate with others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness and their readiness to grow.'<sup>24</sup>

It is a failure of such mutuality if we are not prepared to be as affected by the other as we intend to effect the other. The discord,

22 Cathy Molloy, 'Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching,' in *Catholic Social Teaching in Action*, ed. Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (2005), 132.

23 John Paul II, *Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialia for the twentieth anniversary of Populorum Progressio* (1987), §38.

24 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §172.

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which in many ways dominates the online encounters and media coverage of the ‘me too’ campaign, makes authentic solidarity and dialogue impossible:

Receptivity to otherness even at the cost of extreme provocation to the world we take for granted, coupled with the willingness to risk the vulnerability associated with appropriate disclosure of one’s own view: such is the double-edged discipline of authentic dialogue between persons and communities.<sup>25</sup>

The mutual search for truth and fairness comes after we build trust and mutual respect. From a position of mutual understanding we each need to be willing to modify our own position in light of convincing communication from the other. The risk of disclosing our own views and values needs to be balanced by the need to communicate these appropriately, which means not letting our frame of reference and agenda be the only, or at least the most important, one involved in communication with others.<sup>26</sup> It is questionable whether the world of online social media is capable of facilitating authentic dialogue as it is here understood.

### *Transforming strategy for Change*

The tone of some contributions to the #metoo and #timesup campaigns has been self-congratulatory, interpreting the growth in global public awareness, increased media coverage, and the ‘fall from grace’ of powerful figures as evidence of deep, if revolutionary, societal change. However, it is more realistic to suggest that ‘me too’ is simply the catalyst or opportunity for change: discord still pervades throughout engagement with the movement, and there is negligible visible change to societal structures, value systems, and to customs and behaviour in the everyday lives of people throughout the world. In this instance, effective change is not just about raising global consciousness, disseminating information to individuals, or holding prominent figures to account. Rather, it will entail guiding each other through the incremental/evolutionary process of reconsidering our habits and values, structures, roles, and relationships. It will require everyone to be self-reflective and proactive participants, making a fundamental commitment to pursue a more just and equal society, where gender imbalances are no longer the norm, and sexual harassment, abuse, and violence is eradicated from work-place, social, and domestic relations.

25 Michael A. Cowan and Bernard J. Lee, *Conversation, Risk, and Conversion: The Inner and Public Life of Small Christian Communities* (Marknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 87.

26 *Ibid.*, 88-89.

## THINKING PASTORALLY ABOUT ‘ME TOO’

Such deep change ‘is discontinuous with the past’ and ‘finding your way ... is a matter of not really knowing the way ahead, taking risks, and getting lost – yet continuing to venture into the unknown.’<sup>27</sup> For many, the experience of not knowing is threatening:

Deep change usually begins on the margins ... and only gradually becomes an accepted goal as people see the need for change and are empowered to shape the sorts of changes that will occur. ... Deep change involves confronting the undiscussable and risking the marginalization this may entail. It often originates in a position of relative powerlessness.<sup>28</sup>

This experience of powerlessness can lead many to be despondent ‘about the enormity of many problems and situations and their capacity to change anything’ and yet, as Cathy Molloy suggests, ‘the smallest step taken by an individual in authentic solidarity is of the greatest significance.’<sup>29</sup>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Pastoral theology has a particular concern for concrete lived experiences, including women’s experiences, and the reality of rape, sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the first phase of development of what is known as ‘practical theology’ has been characterised as one of:

... *protest* against the invisibility of women, followed by a task of *resistance* to the objectification and exclusion of women – as agents, as theological authorities, as authentic sources of experience – and of reconstructing tradition and practice in pursuit of a third goal, that of the *transformation* of church and society.<sup>31</sup>

By engaging in sustained theological analysis of the actuality of women’s lives, pastoral theology has sought to ‘claim women’s experiences as worthy of being named as God-given, and thus to move from invisibility to visibility.’<sup>32</sup> There is therefore much commonality between the goals of the ‘me too’ campaign and

27 Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 197.

28 Ibid.

29 Molloy, ‘Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching,’ 133.

30 Jeanne Hoelt, ‘Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,’ in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 414.

31 Elaine Graham, ‘Feminist Theory,’ in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 194.

32 Ibid., 199.

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pastoral theology. Pastoral theological insights thus have a particular value in helping the present ‘revolution of refusal’ to move beyond its initial reactions stage. They remind us of the importance of: attending to others in their particularity; of exercising a genuine and mutual solidarity, which necessitates deep level engagement and mutual accompaniment on the journey to healing and the search for truth and fairness; and, of employing an evolutionary, transformative strategy for achieving deep change, in which people co-create the future through a fundamental commitment to a more just and equal society. This is an emergent process that needs time to develop and ultimately involves allowing others complete agency in determining whether they want to engage with, or participate in, this desire to change.

### **The carrying of the Cross.**

*Come follow me ...*

Fathers and mothers have to shoulder many crosses. Parents have the joy of bringing children into the world, but they have to carry them for a long time before they stand on their own two feet. Children have their crosses too. They often suffer in silence. No wonder, Lord, that you said to the women of Jerusalem: ‘Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.’ Teach us in this mystery, Jesus, to realise that we do not carry the cross alone. We are a family and we carry each other. And you are out ahead of us and we walk in your footsteps.

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– Gabriel Harty, *Make My House a House of Prayer*, Dublin: Veritas, 2018, p.46.