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The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Billy Swan

Tackling the root
causes

January 2019

Tackling the root causes

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During the visit of Pope Francis to Ireland for the World Meeting of Families, the issue of the abuse crisis in the Church followed him everywhere. He addressed it at Dublin Castle, at Knock, during the closing Mass at the Phoenix Park, with the Irish bishops and of course when he met with victims of clerical abuse. Asking and praying for forgiveness and healing was both welcome and necessary in a Church and a country that has suffered greatly from this ‘open wound’ that came to light in the past number of decades. The timing of Pope Francis’ visit to Ireland coincided with the eruption of the abuse crisis in other parts of the world, most notably in Chile and the United States. This led to a greater intensity and pressure on the Pope to address the issue and assure the faithful that this terrible problem was being acknowledged and addressed. When reports like those in Ferns, Dublin, Cloyne or Pennsylvania are published, they detonate a crisis that explodes with devastating effects. In the immediate aftermath, there is an understandable scramble to manage the ‘field hospital’ of the Church as people are justifiably angry, feel betrayed, look for scapegoats and demand action. Such emotion is to be expected but a short term management approach to the immediate fallout of the crisis is insufficient. A closer inspection of the deeper problems and their causes is required if the action taken is to be effective and just.

In the aftermath of the abuse crisis here in Ireland that peaked with the publication of the Ferns, Murphy, Ryan and Cloyne reports, I believe that the Church collectively managed the immediate fallout quite well. Good leadership was shown in acknowledging responsibility, asking for forgiveness, dealing with and caring for both offenders and victims, transparency, establishment of safeguarding structures, support and compensation of those hurt. However, I also believe that a deeper analysis of the root causes of abuse by Church personnel never happened to the extent that it deserved. We didn’t question seriously enough the primary roots of the tumour that is sexual abuse in the Church. A thorough

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conversation that involved both clerics and laity as to *why* this abuse happened in the first place never occurred. Here I offer six reasons why I believe abuse can occur and did occur in the Church. In the stories from victims in Chile, Ireland, America or wherever, there are a number of underlying issues that arise again and again, in one country after another. Patterns emerge that cannot be ignored. In going forward and for the sake of the Church we love, attitudes of ‘this too will pass’ or ‘there will always be sin in the Church’ are unacceptable. Yes, there may always be sin in the Church but this must not translate into complacency or a resignation that these sins will inevitably happen and so there is nothing we can do. As the Book of Proverbs says: ‘My mouth shall meditate truth and my lips shall hate wickedness’ (8:7). St Thomas Aquinas once said that this hatred of wickedness belongs to the virtue of charity (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1ff). After these terrible revelations in our Church, it can no longer be ‘business as usual’. We need to identify the root causes of abuse, hate them passionately and with charity firmly address those causes that have wreaked so much devastation in peoples’ lives.

A WORLD PROBLEM

The first step to appreciating the breath and width of the sexual abuse crisis is to acknowledge that it is a global problem, not a local one. Thirteen years ago I was studying in Rome when the abuse crisis hit hard in Ireland. At the College where I lived, there was an evening lecture to address the revelations of the Ferns report. Before the talk, I asked a non-Irish priest if he had plans to attend. I clearly remember his response: ‘No. This is not a problem in my country’. He was wrong. It is a problem in his country and in every country. Sexual abuse is not a Ferns problem or a Dublin problem. It is not an Irish problem or an American problem or an Australian problem. It is not a Pennsylvanian problem or a Boston problem. To our shame it is a problem in the Church universal and in the whole human family. Because we now know that this is a cancer that effects the whole body of Christ then those directly responsible for the whole body of Christ have a grave duty to protect young people from potential and actual abuse within the Church and to ensure that Church communities are safe places for children and vulnerable adults. One suggested way of doing this would be to extend the *Ad limina* visit to Rome by the world’s bishops where they would be advised on the best safe-guarding structures to protect the vulnerable of their dioceses. Surely the importance of such a visit to a properly resourced dicastery would be just as important, if not more so, than a visit to other dicasteries

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that have been an established part of *Ad limina* visits for centuries. Because clerical abuse is a global problem, countries where the abuse crisis has yet to hit need to act as if it had arrived on their doorstep. Church leaders must not act only when they have to or when the bomb goes off. The time for action is now. The time for complacency is over.

ABUSE OF POWER

On reading the reports of clerical sexual abuse and the specific stories of how abuse came to happen, one familiar dynamic emerges. Instead of priests empowering the young people involved, they overpowered them with emotional manipulation prior to abusing them sexually. This terrible sin enabled them, I believe, to go on to wreak such terrible damage in the lives of the vulnerable and the young who were not strong enough to say ‘no’ to their advances. Their elevated office in the priesthood and positions of authority within institutions and communities provided the perfect conditions for abuse to occur. In our seminaries, clergy conferences and parish safe-guarding training, the abuse of power needs to be met head on and discussed with courage and with repentance. As bishops, priests and religious, we are not about power but service of the needs of others in Jesus’ name. Yes, we have authority but not as a plaything to aggrandise our egos but to build peoples’ faith and the communities we serve. These are God’s people to whom we are accountable, who we serve and whose needs come first.

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In the Church’s hierarchical system, every priest is meant to be accountable to his bishop or religious superior and every bishop/cardinal is accountable to the Pope. So if a cleric is a bully or abusive then it is up to the bishop, or Pope to call him to account. It is painfully obvious that this simplistic model has weaknesses and has not served to halt the actions of abusive priests or bishops. In this crisis, a burning question has emerged: to whom are we priests and bishops accountable? On the vertical scale, we are ultimately accountable to God who judges us now and on the last day (cf. Rom. 14:12). On the horizontal level, we priests are accountable to our bishops and bishops/cardinals to the Pope but this is not sufficient as we have seen. Natural justice demands that we be not only be accountable to ‘the man upstairs’ or the person who is ‘our boss’ but also accountable to those we serve. With this in mind, the importance of parish finance councils, pastoral councils and other collaborative structures is seen in a new light where we can transparently give an account of our stewardship. This is

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a time to recognize that priesthood is not a licence for a private practise. Surely the time has come to commit ourselves to a *code of professional ethics* with at least some degree of *supervision* like other care-giving professionals. Many priests I suspect will find this an intrusion and a mechanism to find fault with their ministry. But this need not be the case. Structures of supervision can detect when there is a problem that needs to be addressed but can also serve to encourage good priests to become even better priests and to become familiar with best practise in all aspects of priestly ministry. For too long, priestly and episcopal ministry has suffered from a lack of accountability. History tragically proves that many abusers did not just abuse but abused over long periods of time, in some cases for decades. No one held them to account for their attitudes and actions until it was too late. We all need to be accountable to someone to prevent the abuse of power that we are all capable of.

BETRAYAL OF TRUST

St Thomas Aquinas once defined love as ‘willing the good of the other’ (*STh* I-II, 26, 4). When I was growing up, I automatically assumed that every priest willed my good and the good of all. Most did. But tragically, as the revelations have shown, some did not. Perhaps this has been the most painful aspect of the crisis to emerge – that the natural, child-like trust invested in people meant to represent Christ, was so horribly betrayed. Yet, I believe that this is a time when the message of love as ‘willing the good of the other’ is more important than ever and can be upheld as the standard of what loving service truly is. It is also an opportunity to realize the importance of trust in any meaningful relationship including our trust in God who assures us, at this difficult time, through the words of Christ: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust in me’ (John 14:1).

SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION

In the flurry of media commentary on this crisis, priestly celibacy is one of the main scapegoats – ‘if priests were married, then this would not have happened’. While this conclusion is understandable, it lacks the hard evidence that being celibate is directly responsible for sexual dysfunction. What the crisis does reveal is that we do need to look again at the sexual maturity of seminarians, priests and bishops in more detail and with more honesty. Being celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God is a noble ideal but still, real questions remain – how can seminarians and priests arrive at and be sustained in a healthy sexual maturity? What resources are there to

support us in this? Do we adequately address the issue of affective maturity in seminaries, at clergy retreats and diocesan conferences or is it still a taboo subject? Is it wise or healthy to send a celibate man into a large house to live on his own and tell him to simply 'get on with it'? What are the professional boundaries in place to ensure the best possible relations between the priest and his people? What are the appropriate sources of love and affection for us priests who are human like everyone else? These are just some of the sensitive but important issues that cry out to be addressed in order to learn from this crisis and move forward.

COVER UP

In the furor over the abuse crisis, the sin of cover-up seems to be almost on a par with the abuse itself. Any explanation that bishops offer for their actions or inactions are almost always interpreted as excuses and are not heard, even when they acted on inadequate or erroneous professional advice. What we can say now is that any genuine attempts that bishops or religious superiors made in the past to deal with abuse issues by keeping the problem secret and 'in house' has failed. The problem is too big and has exploded in our faces. What can we learn from this? That the protection of any pretence of holiness or respectability must give way to the truth, the protection of the vulnerable and the conversion of the person. This applies to all of our lives. Most of us worry more about what people know or think instead of what is true and what is real in us. The Italians have a saying that emphasises the importance of the '*bella figura*' - meaning that a fine impression or good appearance is all important, often at the expense of what is really beneath the surface. Anxiety to protect the '*bella figura*' of the Church under any pretence must give way to a humility and honesty where the roots of holiness and renewal are found in radical authenticity. This holds true even if the truth about ourselves and our Church is distasteful or dark. In the words of Christ, only 'the truth will set us free' (John 8:32).

In conclusion, if a doctor discovers cancer in a patient's body, he/she will not be content to treat the symptoms or the secondaries. The primary tumour must be found. In the Body of Christ that is the Church, there exists the cancer of sexual abuse that urgently needs treatment. Treatment of the secondaries or the symptoms is not good enough. We need to go to the root causes. This often involves more pain but unless the root causes are tackled, the problem will continue. We may feel that the Church is unfairly targeted and scapegoated by society because of sexual abuse when it is a sin that blights the whole human family. But remember the

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words of St Peter: ‘The time has come for the judgment to begin in the household of God’ (1 Pet. 4:17). Judgment begins on this issue in the Church but doesn’t end there. In time, the lancing of a boil in the Church can and does lead to a purification of society of the same disease.

I hope that together as the Body of Christ we will with God’s grace, have the resolve and the courage to go deeper in order to tackle these six root causes of sexual abuse and excise this tumour from the Church. For if the tumour is not removed, the body will die. I believe that God will not allow that to happen which makes me believe that this is a time of hope, despite it also being a time of pain. Now is a time when Christ is applying a tight bandage and poultice around the body of his bride, the Church, to excise the tumours that arose in Ferns, Boston, Dublin, Cloyne, Pennsylvania and other places hit hardest by the tragedy of sexual abuse. ‘Behold, I am making all things new’ (Is. 43:18; Rev. 21:5). God is renewing his Church in these extraordinary and unprecedented times and through her will renew the whole world. Let us rejoice and be glad!

The Psalms. Saint Ambrose, the fourth-century Archbishop of Milan, cherished the Psalter and recommended it to the faithful in every situation. ‘The Psalm,’ he wrote, ‘soothes anger, frees from care and drives away sadness. It is a weapon by night and a teacher by day: it is a shield in times of fear, an occasion of rejoicing for the holy, a mirror of tranquillity: it is a pledge of peace and harmony.’

– OLIVER TREANOR, *Speaking on God’s Behalf*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 66.