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Vincent Doyle

Children of Priests

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Coping International was launched to provide a pastoral and psychotherapeutic space for people that segments of our society would rather forget, children of priests and religious. Launched amid little fanfare, in December 2014, funded by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, [www.copinginternational.com](http://www.copinginternational.com) was left online for over 30 months without any marketing campaign and without media interference.

In August 2017, Coping International went public in the Boston Globe. In the interim period 2014 – 2017 the site data was closely monitored. How many people out there needed help and were actively looking for help? By the time the story was published in the Globe, [www.copinginternational.com](http://www.copinginternational.com) had received more than 400,000 hits in 175 countries, with 1.6% of the hits in 2016 coming from the following search-phrases, “I am pregnant, and the father is a Catholic Priest.” That figure today is north of one million hits on [copinginternational.com](http://copinginternational.com).<sup>1</sup> The question remains, why were and are so many thousands of people worldwide looking online for help, when some parts of society would have you believe that children of priests are so few in numbers that it does not merit attention? Today, Coping International speaks with children and grandchildren of priests as well as mothers of new-borns. We speak with children of nuns, cardinals and religious who have neither guidance nor care. Unacknowledged and hidden, Coping seeks to inform and educate these people showing them a way out of their imposed darkness.

My own interest stems from the fact that I am the son of a Catholic Priest. Blessed with a good upbringing, I knew my father well. Ordained a Holy Ghost in 1966, he was later incardinated to the Diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnoise. Following his death in 1995, I would not be told the truth for sixteen years as to who he –

1 The figures indicate scope and need rather than individual children per se.

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my biological father – was, but more importantly who I am. When a child of a catholic priest has the truth veiled from them, you not only take the parent away, you eat away at the very identity of the child from birth until death.

### THE RESPONSE OF THE IRISH CATHOLIC BISHOPS TOWARD CHILDREN OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS

On 4 June 2014 I handed a letter to Pope Francis on the issue of children of priests at the Vatican. He promised me that he would read the letter. He blessed me, handing me a rosary. ‘...*Si, Si, I will read*’, holding the letter to his heart. He listened to my interpreter who explained the problems presenting and the solution proposed by Coping International. The following Monday, 9 June 2014, the Irish Episcopal Conference addressed the issue of children of priests and religious. I asked them for their initial thoughts on the matter and to make provisions for psychotherapy for mothers and children involved. Care provisions were granted. However, recognition of this as an issue - the church verbalising it - achieved so much more. It gave hope and gave traction to the issue. Over the years since Coping and the Irish Episcopal Conference have communicated in writing and there has been one on one meetings between Coping and Archbishop Diarmuid Martin and former Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Charles Brown which helped push the agenda forward both at home and in Rome. I maintained open communication with Archbishop Eamon Martin who was always more than encouraging and continues to be.

In March 2015, the issue of the use of confidentiality agreements was first addressed.<sup>2</sup> The letter addressed to Coping from the Irish Bishops states in part, ‘such an agreement is unjust if it compromises the consent of the parties involved. For example, if undue pressure is brought to bear on the mother’. The letter continues to state, ‘systemic power can distort the workings of natural justice [...] the power imbalance needs to be restored in such cases’. Episcopal condemnation of efforts that ‘compromise consent’ was groundbreaking. The Irish Episcopal Conference continued to dialogue with Coping International, with both parties growing in knowledge and trust over the years. In 2017, the *Principles of Responsibility toward Priests who Father Children while in Ministry* were published by the Irish Catholic Bishops, which was subsequently lauded by international media. These *Principles* were later ratified by the UISG and USG in Rome and have had momentous influence globally in terms of safeguarding children of male and female

2 Irish Catholic Bishops Conference (2015). *Regarding Confidentiality agreements and Children of Catholic Priests*. <http://www.copinginternational.com/officialstatements/>

religious. These guidelines are considered to me amongst the first of their kind in the history of the Church.

The Irish Position influenced Rome's position on the matter. The Pontifical Commission for Safeguarding of Minors contacted Coping International in October 2017 and later in September 2018.<sup>3</sup> The Commission stated, 'at the most recent meeting of the PCPM it was decided that the Guidelines Working Group should consider the development of guidelines on children of priests. [...] We are just beginning that work. We will be looking at any existing guidance on this issue such as the recent statement by the Bishops Conference of Ireland and working with the various departments of the Curia in Rome which have responsibilities related to this issue'. This position was later confirmed and furthered by the new appointees of the Commission in September 2018. In my role as Coping Director I now consult with the Commission providing non-identifiable data to assist their growing knowledge of this issue.

In April 2018, the Irish Bishops would go even further and address what Coping considered to lie at the heart of the matter, assumed sociological default responses to the issue facing children of clergy. Coping in early 2018 asked the Irish Bishops, "if a priest fathers a child, is remaining in the priesthood one of the responses that may be considered as a response to this situation?" The Irish Catholic Bishops responded: "it is not possible to rule out, at the beginning, any possible responses to these situations, which involves a simple default position of insisting that a man 'leave the priesthood' or that he automatically be permitted to continue in active ministry." (Irish Catholic Bishops Conference., 2018.) The Irish Bishops struck new ground, a middle ground characterised by safeguarding of the most innocent and forgotten. This position was later adopted by the Bishops of England and Wales as well as Scotland.

#### WHAT PROBLEMS SURROUND CHILDREN OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS?

The psychological problems surrounding children of priests and religious germinate in society and are rooted in clericalism, thus psychosocial in nature. Imposed or assumed silence, masked as privacy becomes the hallmark of the child's life at conception. Out of this silent world emerges a child who is nervous and confused. Nervous at the imposed, domineering silence and confused as to why they must remain silent regarding something so natural. Anxiety plays a major role in the child's daily life, anxiety linked to expectant behaviour on behalf of the child. It is here that the

3 Pontifical Commission for Protection of Minors (2017). *Letter to Coping International, 2017*. [www.copinginternational.com/holysee](http://www.copinginternational.com/holysee)

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phenomenon of conditional parenting may be identified. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs cites ‘conditional parenting, in which the level of care shown to a child is made contingent on his or her behaviours or actions’ as an example of emotional abuse. One does not have to go out of Ireland to find such examples. Prolonged exposure to the clericalist source of anxiety corrodes the psychological well-being of the child. Imposed silence can breed intense anger. Anger management is a vital to Coping’s work, promoting healthy avenues to express the confused anger that has built up over time since birth. If the person experiencing the anger is an introvert, this can have damaging consequences in the long term if not treated properly. Implosive anger rooted in adverse childhood experiences that are difficult to understand, runs the risk of lasting personal damage to the person, psychologically, emotionally, even physically if manifested psychosomatically. Introvert anger can express itself as self-harm. If the person is an extrovert, their behaviour might appear odd, unexplainable. Addiction problems accompany both the introvert and extrovert as well as obsessive behaviour. Paranoia is a primary characteristic – mixed with fear, fear of the church, or distrust – of the silenced child; their nervousness can lead to behaviour that is distressing for their own persona and those around them. Introversion mixed with paranoia has debilitating effects on the natural development of the child.

‘Emotional abrasion’ exists when the interior, suffering self is stopped from emerging into the openness to heal by the exterior, socially acceptable self; one rubbing against the other, wearing down the inner walls of emotional stability, breeding nervousness and promoting anxiety, anxiety which cannot be expressed properly, thus the cycle continues.

The primary difference between the child of a priest and he/she who is not the child of a priest is the ever-looming presence of institutional clericalism, whether in the mind of the mother or in the eyes of the child. Clericalism permeates the domestic environment of the child at birth and like a cancer, suffocates and stifles all that is natural.

## LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

We are in conversations with church authorities across the world, in terms of guidance and policy design, we also assist clients in coming to know their needs and help them to represent their needs to religious authorities with confidence. As Coping looks to the future, we envision a church that supports all children, and recognises all children, regardless of parentage, as having worth. It is my great hope that one day soon, we will hear from the Holy

Father these words, “children of priests and religious worldwide.” For when he does that, he automatically and at once, brings into the light, all those left blinking in a clericalist darkness that suffocates natural rights.

To conclude, I wish to openly thank the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference and the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland, particularly Teresa Devlin for believing in this project. To Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, children of priests who have suffered abuses “of whatever kind” owe you a debt of gratitude. To Archbishop Eamon Martin and each Catholic Bishop of Ireland, thank you for caring for children of priests and having the foresight to do what is right.

**Learning to be free.** Seeking to be attentive in the presence of God: this way of praying may seem very simple, perhaps even too simple. Yet regular practice of such prayer is an amazing route to freedom. We can go far by going nowhere! Even when the time frame, the practical arrangements and the content of this prayer are very stable and regular, this does not lead to stagnation. How is that? By repeating the name of God inwardly, we advance, because we try to avoid everything that could hinder us, everything that would take the place of God

– JEAN-MARIE GUEULLETTE, *How to Sit with God*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 111.