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## Abuse, Action and Hope

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# Abuse, Action and Hope: a reflection on Pope Francis' visit to Ireland

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Pope Francis' visit to Ireland was a sober affair: a long way from the mass of faces lifted up in 1979 to greet John Paul II as his plane appeared in the sky bringing him down to the people like the long-lost Messiah.

That sobriety was good. Popes represent the Lord no more, or no less, than any other baptised member of the Lord's church. This has been one of the key messages of Pope Francis. He sees the church as a pyramid with the baptised People of God at the top and clergy at the bottom.

Because of this he wants a more synodal church in which local communities, with lay people heavily involved, will have much more influence.

But he found it hard to get across his message on this, or on family issues - the purpose of his visit - because most of the public events were dominated by abuse. The appalling revelations from Pennsylvania triggered huge anger because of the history of abuse in Ireland. The focus of that anger has shifted from the abuse itself to cover ups, slowness, or incompetence in the response of authorities.

Why has the Church been so slow to respond? Before discussing this it is important to distinguish understanding from excusing. There are no excuses for the bad response. Every failure was seriously wrong because children suffered. But if we do not make the effort to understand why the institution acted as it did we will be like a police officer investigating crime with no understanding of a criminal's mind, and we will not help to protect children.

One reason for the slowness is that most people simply want to

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avoid the issue. For those who have not been abused themselves, or who have not met others who have, the whole area of abuse feels like a foreign country. My own reaction, decades ago, to the news of the abuse in America was: 'Thank God we don't have problems like that here'.

Today that seems unbelievable, yet that is the thought that went through my head at the time. I knew nothing about the issue, had never come across it, had never been taught about it, and had done no thinking about it.

While I am ashamed of my response, I think it is instructive, because it is likely to be the reaction of many in other countries where many allege there is no child abuse or that it is a Western, or even an Irish problem.

After our experience in Ireland, no one could or should accept that response, although we also need to listen to people in Third World countries who point out that sex abuse is but one trauma that so many children endure, along with the effects of war, famine, and economic disasters.

A second reason, clearly, has been to protect the image of the Church. This is about as perverse as it gets. To allow the continuing abuse of an innocent child is the direct opposite of the mission of the Church which is to show the love of God for all. Our human capacity to twist goodness towards evil is seemingly infinite.

A third reason is more subtle: compassion among superiors and bishops. Not compassion for the invisible child, but for the person who abused the child. Again it is important to remind ourselves that saying this is not to offer an excuse, but rather to understand how superiors could respond so disastrously.

Many who abuse are extremely charismatic and convincing. It can be difficult not to believe them. They can also apparently or actually repent.

It is in the DNA of Christians to offer compassion to repentant sinners. Add to this a belief - in the past - among some superiors that the abuser will never sin again, a belief that was only possible because the superior knew nothing about the dynamics of abuse and you have a lethal cocktail.

Responding with mercy and compassion is in fact the correct answer for a Christian. But mercy and compassion should never be confused with failing to report abuse to the authorities. The end result of such compassion is continuing catastrophic suffering for the child.

There is no place in child protection for naive, well-meaning, compassionate amateurs.

A fourth reason for the slowness to respond was that the institutional church was attacked. Defensiveness is a natural

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response to attack, albeit entirely unjustified and self-defeating. While child protection will never be perfect we have come a long way in the Catholic Church in Ireland. But given our disastrous response in the past we surely have a duty to reflect on the process we went through, to understand how and why we did this, and then to use our knowledge to help protect children across the world. There are several areas in which we can do this.

The first, is to let others know the process that we went through - a process of which I have only outlined in part - because it is similar to what other countries went through.

A second, which applies both at home and abroad, is the oversight of the nuncio, bishops and religious leaders. There are vastly improved oversight structures for priests and religious. But who oversees their superiors?

Many think that this is the task of the Archbishop of Armagh, since he is the Primate of all Ireland. This is incorrect. The Archbishop of Armagh has no executive authority over any other bishop in the country. Nor does the Irish Episcopal Conference. Each bishop is accountable, in canon law, only to the Pope. Religious orders, while subject to the local bishop, have also varying degrees of independence.

So if a bishop abuses children, or if he fails to report abuse to the police, who takes action? What processes are in place to deal with this? How transparent and independent are these structures? Even if the Bishops' Conference produces protocols that they recommend to all bishops, an individual bishop will be able to refuse to obey them under canon law. And what investigative powers will any body set up by the Bishops' Conference have, for example to seize documents, and to subpoena witnesses?

An obvious answer is that it is the responsibility of any lay person, religious or priest to report abuse to the proper authorities. But the institution has in place its own procedures to deal with allegations against clergy, along with reporting to secular authorities, but where are the procedures for superiors and bishops? Suppose a religious superior or bishop keeps quiet or fails to act in accordance with protocols, what then?

Recently allegations were made against three of the special group of Cardinals, known as the G9, that Pope Francis has created to help him govern the church. Cardinal Pell of Australia has been accused of abuse, Cardinal Errázuriz of Chile of covering up abuse, and Cardinal Rodríguez of Honduras of financial impropriety. The Pope himself was accused by Archbishop Viganò of failing to respond in 2013 to reports about US Cardinal McCarrick. All have denied these charges, and Cardinal Ouellet has issued a strong rejection of Archbishop Viganò's charges.

But what was the process which led to these outcomes? Who were the participants? What lay oversight was there? How can Church members accept these denials with confidence if there is not a robust, independent and transparent process to assess the claims?

This is where the entirely appropriate desire of Pope Francis to decentralise authority in the Church in accordance with Vatican II (a more synodal church) can run into problems.

On the issue of child protection, while we certainly need strong local structures, we need an extremely robust centralised structure. That structure needs to be both transparent and independent of clergy and religious. And it needs to oversee not only nuncios, bishops and religious world-wide, but also the Pope himself.

No one can be above the law when it comes to child protection.

It is clear that such a robust centralised structure can only be set up by the Pope. In March 2017 Irish abuse victim Marie Collins resigned from the Vatican's Commission for the Protection of Minors because of her frustration at the poor Vatican response. When he met Marie in Dublin in August 2018 Pope Francis said that he does not see the need for such a tribunal because in fact bishops are being held accountable.

This is to some degree true. Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of seven Chilean bishops, and taken action against Cardinal McCarrick, but again how transparent or independent are the procedures that led to these outcomes?

There may be valid arguments about the type of structures that we need. One size will not fit all: it is not possible, for example, to require reporting to the police in all countries because of police corruption. The complexity of governing an international church was well illustrated by Hans Zollner in an article in *La Civiltà Cattolica* in April last year.

Nonetheless there can be no argument about the need for a centralised, transparent and effective system to oversee the setting up of proper protection protocols in all countries, and to hold to account those leaders who do not implement them.

The abuse crisis is not going away. Precisely because so many people will have the same ignorance that I had myself several decades ago they will not believe that this could happen in their own countries, thereby making abuse more likely. In areas with deep patriarchal systems, where a clerical structure is still strong, and with that most insidious of diseases - deference based on clericalism - children are almost certainly being abused today.

Further, more and more reports like Pennsylvania will highlight the depth of suffering that people have gone through. The Church in Africa, Asia, India and Central America will come under the

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spotlight. That is good because it will expose evil and vindicate victims. But it will also make it more difficult for many victims to move towards freedom because so many will be re-traumatised.

Because of our own experience in Ireland, and because we know that massive pressure is needed for any organisation to change in this area, Irish Catholic church members have a grave responsibility to ensure not only that our own child protection is constantly improving, but also to join with others in pressuring the international church to do the same.

There are, according to Rome-based journalist Paddy Agnew, no child protection structures in place in Italy. That surely shows the magnitude of the task facing the whole church.

Finally, a word of encouragement. Many Catholics today are wondering how they can continue in a Church with such manifest corruption. I struggled with this question myself, and eventually wrote a book on it. Doing so helped me, because while on the one hand it exposed me more deeply to the horrors of abuse, it also put me in touch with the riches in the Church. It would be wrong to allow the abuse crisis to blind us to these.

At the centre of these riches is our personal and communal relationship with Christ. His companionship should inspire us to work harder to protect the children that he loves so much, and whom he made models of discipleship. It would be tragic to move away from the riches of the Eucharist, the sacraments, the service towards others that has always gone on in the Church, the experience of prayer, the struggles in theology, and hand the church over to some who do not want to repent for the abuse.

Repentance certainly means saying sorry and meaning it. But it also means taking measures to move away from the harm we have done. That means getting structures and values in place in the Church throughout the world to make children safer.

In the end repentance deepens our relationship with Our Lord. It gives us freedom and joy. And it witnesses to the truth that St Paul discovered: 'The love of God overwhelms us'