



### CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

#### *Why raise the topic now?*

— There are Provinces where the matter of child abuse by Brothers or lay staff in Marist Institutions is in the public arena. There are Brothers in jail, others with cases before the courts, others accused. While it is true that this matter is public in some Provinces only, it does not mean that the offense has not happened in others, nor that it will not become a public matter in other Provinces in years to come. I do not think there is a sudden outbreak of child sexual abuse. Its incidence is now more public with shifts in social attitudes and with changes to the law of certain countries.

Brother Charles wrote on this topic in the *Bulletin for Provincials* #9 (November 1990) and in #12 (February 1993). I hope you have them within easy reach to refresh your memories on the contents and the anxieties of which he reminded us there. Just now I shall limit myself to recalling it not because it is a matter of concern at Institute level, but because the pressures on Provincials when such a case arises are enormous. Most of us are ill-prepared to deal with all the pastoral, justice, legal, media aspects involved. Having an overall understanding of these aspects is important to the well-being of all concerned and of yourself if you have to deal with such a matter.

There remain a certain number of “myths” in our understanding of and approach to child sexual abuse that we must correct. Acting out of ignorance in such a significant area of concern to children and families would be irresponsible on our part, who are committed to evangelisation.

#### *Myths:*

1. Child abuse is primarily a moral issue to be treated by helping the perpetrator to reform himself morally and by distancing him from the place of his offense.

*Wrong:* Child abuse is primarily an act which has long term psychological consequences for the victim. Evidence shows that such consequences come to light frequently many years after the event. Our first responsibility when such an offence occurs is the well-being and care of the victim, without neglecting the pastoral care of the Brother.

2. *Celibacy inclines men to be more likely to act out sexually against children and teenagers.*

*Wrong:* Statistical evidence, such as exists, shows that the proportion of religious men or priests who act out this way is of the same order as in the rest of the population. Neither is homosexuality the issue. The sensationalism around cases involving religious or priests is related to the heightened sense of shock, shame, or breach of trust on the one hand, or a desire to attack the Church and undermine its moral influence on the other.

3. *People who accuse religious or priests of such offenses are motivated primarily by the money which they may gain.*

*Wrong:* While this may be the motivation of some lawyers involved, most victims are interested in having their position as “victim” recognised, i.e. that they were not responsible for what happened. They want justice done for the sake of other possible victims by having the offender moved from positions where they could commit other offenses.

4. *There are centres in existence which can “cure” habitual offenders, rehabilitating them for future active ministry with young people.*

*Wrong:* Such centres can assist offenders to acknowledge their sexual disorder and control their acting out, but it would be imprudent of the religious order to reappoint the person to work with young people and of the offender to accept such an appointment.

#### *Comments for your guidance in the area of child sexual abuse:*

a. The above remarks are for your information as Provincial. I hope to be able to discuss the matter with you in more of a dialogue setting such as at a Conference of Provincials.

b. The pastoral care of young people is fundamental to our mission and so prevention of their abuse is

our priority concern. This implies adequate psychosexual formation in initial and ongoing formation. Personal accompaniment is a major assistance in helping candidates and young Brothers to deal with their human development.

c. Even if matters have not become public or been brought into the legal arena, we have a basic responsibility of providing for the pastoral and psychological care of the victim and family and of the Brother. This may involve covering the costs of professional therapy for the victim, rather than attempting to become directly involved in the counselling needed.

d. It is good to be aware of existing protocols and policies covering procedures to follow and the rights involved when a Brother is accused. If you want a copy of such documents you can contact me or Br Seán Sammon.

e. Take every accusation seriously, listening carefully and showing great personal concern. A majority of accusations have some substance. However, not all accusations are true. It is dangerous for an "interested" party, such as the Provincial, to be the judge of the truth of an accusation. The protocols referred to in #4 indicate the need for trusted people outside the Brothers' community to assist in determining the truth of what has happened. In some countries, dioceses have set up independent assessment committees. They do not protect a Brother from criminal charges if that is what the victim proposes but they can advise the Provincial on the truth and the dimension of the offense.