

Dear Madam,

I am writing to you in response to the article written by Father Michael Mc Girr in the April 1997 issue of your magazine.

The article by Father Mc Girr dealt with his day in our courts. Like Fr Mc Girr I am also unfamiliar with our court system and found myself all at sea when faced with the system of justice as administered in our fair state. The friend of Fr Mc Girr's a certain "Tom Mathews" (as he is called in the article), was also the reason that I was in court that day. In the article Fr Mc Girr stated that he tried to imagine life on the Victim's side of the case. I would now like to take this opportunity to present it.

At 9 years of age I was a country boy who found myself moving schools. The school I had attended until grade 5 was run by the Josephite nuns, in a very caring and deeply religious community. Due to circumstances beyond my family's control my mother needed join the workforce soon after the birth of the last of her three children. This cast her as a pariah in our local catholic community where a wife and mother's place was in the home. In 1972 the opportunity arose for my mother to obtain a job in Ballarat with "school hours" attached, so in the best interests of the family, my brother and I were transferred to the Christian Brothers School near her work.

I was very apprehensive about leaving the very caring and close knit school I was currently attending but when Sister Josephine assured me that the Christian Brothers were like the nuns but only men, my fears were somewhat allayed. This change in school bought me into contact with "Tom Mathews". In my country community I may have live a closeted life but adults were people who could be explicitly trusted especially if members of the clergy. The local priest had access to our home whatever time of day every day of the year.

I won't go into detail here of the litany of abuse that "Tom Mathews" perpetrated against me, suffice to say that it continued for over 2 years and happened at school, my home and at our caravan on holidays. This would illustrate a great deal of planning and premeditation that is not borne out in the article by Fr Mc Girr. The abuse against my brother also took place over a period of 12 months. It took a great deal of time for me to realise the full implication of the abuse that I had suffered at the hands of "Tom Mathews".

After leaving primary school my parents, endeavouring to give me every opportunity to achieve a good education, sent me to a Christian Brothers Boarding School. To say that I found this traumatic would be understating the case.

As I entered the adult world I found that I had (and still have) great difficulty forming friendships with adult males. I still have to this day No significant Male friends. I find I am unable to trust men.

After many years my Mother came to me devastated one day to tell me that my brother had come and told her that "Tom Mathews" had sexually abused him in primary school and he also stated that he knew that I had also been abused. The look of devastation on my mother's face tore me apart and so as not to add to this and for a lot of personal reasons I said that I hadn't been abused. By this time I had had some traumatic personal relationships and was now married. That night I went home and told my wife of my brother's revelation and that I had also been abused. I was petrified of her reaction but to her credit she was very supportive and said that it didn't change our relationship.

The next crisis in my life came with the birth of our son. I had great difficulty in forming a bond with him. Then came the dreams and nightmares to the stage that I was dreaming of taking a gun and endeavouring to locate "Tom Mathews" and murdering him. I could actually see the bullet hitting him in the face. After a sustained period of this I realised that I was quietly going around the twist. At about this time the Catholic Church set up a counselling service. This meant that I would at last have to tell someone

else what had happened to me. Until now I had controlled this part of my life with great force and to trust someone else with this information made me feel extremely vulnerable. I found the counselling service to be of mixed benefit. On the positive side it gave me the courage to tell my parents what happened. This caused them all the more heartache, which now as a parent I can understand into a small degree. I can't understand that they blame themselves for this abuse, and that it happened to both of their sons compounded the matter tenfold. I won't take up time here to explain the full gamut of the emotions that were gone through during the next couple of weeks that followed, but I am sure that any parent could sympathise.

Then I learned that my brother had assaulted a person on the street who he thought was "Tom Mathews" and I felt that something needed to be done. I rang my brother to discuss options with him, our relationship was very cold as he felt I had betrayed him by not confessing to the abuse when he first told our parents. He contacted the media outlets and felt the best course of action would be to publicise in our plight in the popular media. I felt that a more legalistic approach might be better in the long run as sensationalism rarely achieves anything substantial, but agreed with him that an approach to media should be an option to be kept open. I contacted the Community Policing Squad had made an appointment myself and my brother to see them under a no pressure situation. The beauty of this arm of the police force is that it gives you the opportunity to talk to the police informally without the need to make a statement. As we spoke to the Sergeant my brother and I decided to make a formal statement. A C.I.B. detective came and took my brother away for his statement and I made mine to the Sergeant, it took 2 ½ hours.

The most sobering part of this process was to learn that we had to be very specific of the timing of the abuse and whilst I was unable to give dates it wasn't sufficient to say that I had been abused on an average of once a week over a period of time. Thus "Tom Mathews" would only face four charges from my statement. It was very difficult and traumatic to remember these events of 25 years ago but a specific day of abuse was nigh on impossible, so it was that I was only able to remember accurately times the abuse changed (got worse or the location changed). Are after we had made our statements I said to my brother that I wouldn't read his or want to know the specific details of his abuse in case some smart lawyer in the future accused us of making it all up. To be believed by the police was a great relief.

The problem then became that all we knew of "Tom Mathews" was his first and last names, and that he was no longer a Christian Brother. It took a while for the police to locate him and this period was very stressful to my family – what if he was dead and all this heartache had been in vain. When we received the news that he had been located and charged we were relieved. The news that he had admitted guilt to the police was also initially a relief. Are after a day or two the full implication of a guilty plea sank in. I wouldn't be able to confront this person and tell him the impact that these abuse had had on my life.

The first day that we were to go to court was an anticlimax, the hearing was adjourned without even a mention in court and bail extended, and was of great stress to my family, as we had arranged time off and had steeled ourselves to confronting this person. The next court date "Tom Mathews" had to appear and the case was adjourned at his request. My father was extremely angry felt like punching "Tom Matthews". At the next court date my family were sure that today there would be something concrete. "Tom Mathews" appeared by himself and requested an adjournment as they were awaiting a psychologist report. At the date of the next court appearance "Tom Mathews" again requested an adjournment this time stating that they had not had enough access to the police files. Once again the adjournment was granted, and by this time my family and I were distraught – how could this evil, vile person have everything his own way? The only answer the police could give us was that this is our court system. And the next court hearing date again "Tom Mathews" appeared alone and requested yet another adjournment. The magistrate had finally had enough and said so, he then set a date for the case to be heard and "Tom Mathews" stated that this date was unsuitable to him. The Magistrate fed up with the delays said that the

course court system wasn't there for "Tom Mathews" convenience. This was the first time that I felt that justice might actually be done.

The trauma and stress that these five adjournments caused to myself, my brother and our families is beyond all comprehension. That this "Tom Mathews", who had already caused untold grief and damage to our lives, could manipulate the court system, which we considered our only hope for any justice, was almost too much to bear. We all became rather depressed, especially my father. Fr Mc Girr states that it was a stressful Christmas for "Tom" and his family, what was it like for our families? The Day finally arrived and "Tom Mathews" arrived with a great entourage and we all sat through details of sorrow that our fair city dishes up on these days.

During the lunch break the media approached me asking if my brother and I wanted to appear on the media. Not entirely trusting ourselves to be restrained at the outcome of the day, we decided against being interviewed and up until now we haven't appeared on the media and don't feel like doing so.

When our case finally came up, the charges were readout. We were sitting in the back row behind "Tom's" family. My parent had tears in their eyes and I noticed that "Tom's" sister crying. My mother asked me what all those people could be doing here with such a disgusting person. I said that I thought that they would get up in the witness box and say what a great person he is. The magistrate stated he has read our impact statements over the lunch break and does either lawyer object to this – they don't but I wanted to, as I wanted the impact statements to be read out in court so as people could understand the impact this abuse has had on my life. The witness parade then came up to the stand to say the wonderful things about "Tom" that I had expected. Soon I was feeling guilty, how could I have bought out into the open this man's past and bought his great name into disrepute, never mind that he pleaded guilty, this man could not have done these terrible things.

Some absolutely amazing things that I learnt, the psychologist Ronald Conway (who has been a consultant psychologist to the Catholic Church since the early sixties' and was part of the psychological screening of the clergy) saw "Tom Mathews" for counselling during the time that the abuse occurred. Tom had only told him it related to one boy he was very surprised to learn that it was two. Tom had informed the principal of the Christian Brothers Order in our City he had done nothing to tell my parents that this was occurring. This revelation made understanding what had happened so much harder for my parents as Tom had abused me after seeing Ronald Conway and after the Christian Brothers Principal knew of the abuse.

The most traumatic event of the day was still to come. Father Michael Mc Girr of the Jesuit order was called to the witness box. That "Tom" had an army of character witnesses on his side was hard enough for my family, then to learn that one of them was a priest was really beyond endurance. We learned that Tom was married for the third time by Fr Mc Girr in a Catholic Church and Fr Mc Girr had some very pleasant things to say about "Tom". He shifted a lot of the blame for "Tom's" behaviour onto the training and upbringing that "Tom" had endured. This smacked of too much convenience for me, nowhere was there any questioning of this evidence. The Police prosecutor was mute, his job having been done when a guilty plea had been entered.

If "Tom" had lived an inhuman life as stated by Fr Mc Girr, did excuse him from treating me inhumanly? That this could be put forward by Fr Mc Girr make my blood boil, "Tom", whilst having been treated less than ideally had shown himself to me and my family as a very cunning and manipulative planner. Maybe a spur of the moment action could be excused as an emotional shortcoming or as a result of an event in his recent life, the sustained abuse perpetrated against myself and my brother showed much thought and planning had been required.

As "Tom's" Barrister proceeded through a list of character witnesses, friends, siblings, (all saying basically the same things) the crystallising thing for me as to how cold and manipulative the defence were prepared to be, was when "Tom's" very elderly and frail mother was called.

Earlier we had heard how "Tom" had basically been forced to join the Christian Brotherhood by his parents and that they had been partly responsible for the life he had led since joining the Brotherhood, the inhuman treatment and as a result of this treatment the, then abuse by "Tom" of my brother and myself. "Tom's" parents had been in tears all through this and as I sat behind them I was moved to tears by their plight. Then for "Tom" and his defence to be so cruel as to call his mother to the witness stand was beyond the pale. As "Tom's" mother (who could barely walk) made her way towards the witness stand I was extremely relieved when the magistrate called a halt, even the most hard hearted of the people wouldn't have wanted to put "Mrs Matthews" on the stand, he showed his disapproval strongly. You could palpably feel the tension go out of the Room when the Barrister saw the sense and decency in not allowing "Mrs Matthews" to take the stand. As the barrister summed up, the Magistrate mentioned that shouldn't the consequences of the victim to be called into account?? The Barrister agreed but also painted Tom as a victim, a victim of his upbringing and training and after all hadn't offended since!!!??? He had admitted guilt and saved his victims the trauma of a trial. The magistrate weighing up all the facts sentenced "Tom" to a two year suspended sentence. This sentenced caused some debate within my family, some felt that "Tom" should have gone to jail, but on balance I could see the reasoning of the argument used by the Magistrate. May be if "Tom" had faced charge for every offence it would have been different, I can't say.

Now we look to rebuild our lives. The anger, pain and sense of betrayal by the Catholic Church of my family is probably now greater than before, but maybe it needs to be brought to a head so as the boil will burst and the healing can start. I attended a forum conducted by Broken Rights and found the anger of lay people in the church unsettling, these people weren't and still aren't being given that the full story. At this forum were Brother Michael Godfrey the Provincial General of the Christian Brothers and also Father Finnegan a representatives of the Bishop of Ballarat. At the end of the forum I was encouraged by the response of Brother Godfrey and extremely angry by the response of Fr Finnegan. When asked what the Diocese and the Bishop intended to do about this problem he looked Blankley at the audience and shrugged his shoulders.

My family have been both disappointed and gladdened by reached by the response of the Catholic Community around them. I found that people fall into two definite opposing camps. Some support what my brother and I have done in bringing this matter forward, whilst others feel that no good has or could come from exposing of the sexual abuse that we suffered. Most amazing was the response of a teacher friend of my parents who happens to teach at a school of the same name as the one where the abuse occurred, it seems that since the litany of abuse suffered by the students of the school that my brother and I attended has been exposed, parents are removing their children from this school and teachers are afraid of losing their jobs. This friend of my parents feels that what is past is past. This view seems to permeate throughout the whole structure of the Church. Whatever happened to Compassion, Love and Understanding. My father has become embittered to the point that he basically won't associate with any Catholics because of this attitude. Luckily a small minority of Catholics are supporting my family. My parents having been raised in deeply religious families and having had numerous relations in Catholic Religious Orders have found this experience shattering.

My brother is coping, but how well I do not know. He is on his second marriage and has been through some very tough times, he now has two children. We are starting to rebuild our relationship, I am trying to find my way through a fog of anger and sorrow. Everyone seems to be an expert on our next course of action. The legal fraternity say that we should pursue a civil suit against the Christian Brothers and hold them to account. Will this help?? I don't know!! What I do know is that the only way to hold the Christian Brothers to account is to make them realise what they have done to me and my brother. This process has been revealing to me, I have discovered something that I am sure many Lay Catholics don't know, the Catholic Church does not exist in Australia. It is a loose amalgamation of some 30 to 40 orders that co-operate under the banner of the Catholic Church when it suits them.

I have contacted Br Godfrey, we're going to work out a solution. Money may well be part of it and I know this sounds mercenary but how else do you punish an institution. Br Godfrey has expressed an apology and sorrow that my brother and I have suffered so much, but whilst at the sentiments are heartfelt they are only words.

My mother also angry by the fact that Fr Mc Girr appeared for "Tom Matthews" that she felt (and the family encouraged her) that she needed to confront him. This may have been a most significant step forward in the process of healing. After my mother explained our side of the story and some facts relating to "Tom Matthews" abuse of her children it seems that "Tom" may have been less than honest with him. My mother came home from her meeting a much relieved woman, not only had she received a fair hearing from Fr Mc Girr but he had expressed a willingness to meet with my brother and I.

Fr Mc Girr turned up at my house unannounced on the following Saturday obviously deeply affected by what my mother had had to say to him. Unfortunately I was on my way to a function and was only able to give him an hour of my time. The talk that I had with Fr Mc Girr was very fruitful and I stated to him that whilst his apology on behalf of the Catholic Church was welcome it was still only words and all the good intention in the world needed action to back it up. I used an analogy to Fr Mc Girr that may or may not have been a good one. This abuse that had happened to me is like losing a leg, all the good words in the world won't help to grow it back is something that I am going to have to live with. My parting words were a quote from someone I am unsure who, "Please do not let us suffer in vain, the surely must be a reason for our suffering"

Did we receive justice? I don't know.

Whilst a guilty plea and conviction were good, "Tom Mathews" only faced a very small percentage of the abuse that he committed against me. Maybe if and when he faces of truth about his actions instead of shifting blame onto the system, he will finally realise that very dramatic impact that he has had a on our lives. Also maybe when the Catholic Church finally takes some concrete action and supports of victims of the abuses perpetrated by its members it will help. But this needs to be on an institution wide basis not individual people. It will have been worthwhile if all of the Lay people have the guts to stand up and be counted and to say to these Clergy that you have betrayed the greatest trust of we could have given you, you have harmed our innocent children and we want action. Also will hope that this story and the experience of others will give all the victims of abuse the courage to stand up, the matter how long ago the abuse happened. They hurt never goes away whilst exposing this abuse is extremely painful it is the first step towards healing.