

Seeing the Faces, Hearing the voices

A Pentecost Letter on Sexual Abuse of the Young in the Catholic Church

It has taken a tragically long time for other Australians to begin to see the faces and hear the voices of Indigenous people. For too long Indigenous Australians were simply unseen and unheard; and that was the way the rest of us seemed to want it. Their land was *Terra nullius*; they were not citizens. Now that Indigenous people are visible and audible, we others are not sure what exactly to do about their suffering, but at least we can see them and hear them - and even say sorry. The same is true, I now think, of the survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and elsewhere. For too long they were unseen and unheard. To see their faces and hear their voices has taken people like me a tragically long time. But at least now we can see their faces and hear their voices, even if we have no quick fix for the devastation we see and hear.

The story of sexual abuse of the young within the Catholic Church has been the greatest drama of my thirty-six years in the priesthood. So let me tell my own story of growing awareness of the reality; the story is mine but I suspect it is not unlike the story of many. I speak in retrospect but with no illusions about the present or the future. I cannot say that abuse of the young is not still happening in the Church nor that it will not happen in the future. What I can say is that the bitter lessons of the past have made it more likely that I and the Church will deal sensitively with abuse and its aftermath now and in the future.

The first case I heard of was in the 1970s when I was a young priest in Melbourne. When the news broke, I thought it was weird and distressing. I had hardly heard the word paedophilia in my early life and seminary training; I knew what it meant but I would have struggled to spell it. If I thought of paedophilia at all in the Church, I would have found it mind-boggling that a priest, to whom the young are entrusted in a special way, could abuse children. But there it was undeniably, and I thought it was a tragic and isolated episode.

But then more cases came to light though the 1980s and 1990s. Some of these were all the more troubling because among the abusers were priests who seemed well-functioning human beings and good pastors. By the mid-90s, I was serving as spokesman for the Church in Melbourne, so I had to try to know the facts, understand them and speak about them in public. At that stage, I could not accept that this abuse was somehow cultural, by which I mean that it was more than merely personal, that it was the product of a "system". I insisted that it was a matter of personal not communal or institutional culpability, that it did not represent something systemic in the culture of the Catholic Church. Individual clergy and religious had not only sinned grievously but had also committed crimes, and they needed to answer for it personally before God and the law. That much seemed clear to me.

It was at this time that I had my first meetings with survivors of sexual abuse as individuals and in groups. These meetings showed me the extraordinary damage done to many of them by the abuse they had suffered. This was something that I had not encountered or understood previously, and I was deeply shocked. I was taken aback at times by the force of their anger, which was of a kind I had rarely if ever encountered, and it was something in the face of which I felt at times powerless to respond. I could see that these were people in need of all the care and compassion we could offer and that any response that did not have them as its prime concern was bound to fail - at least if the

Gospel was the measure of success and failure. I could also see, and have come to see more clearly since, that those abused can be overlooked, even hidden. The challenge for me was to see their faces and to hear their voices, and that was not easy.

Through the 1990s, I came to realise that, just as we had failed to understand the effects of the abuse, so too we had not understood the nature of the pathology or the scale of the problem. We have learnt a great deal on both counts in recent years, though there is still much to be learnt as things continue to unfold; but at least now our learning is set on a firmer base. One thing we have learnt is just how compulsive the pathology can be. At first I thought that most incidents of sexual abuse were one-off incidents, and that can be true at times. But I now know that most paedophile abuse is serial. I was aghast to read transcripts of the trials of paedophile clergy; it seemed that their lives revolved around the grooming and abuse of children. It was apparent that this kind of abuse was something other than a moral lapse, a fall into sin, which could be made good by appropriate repentance, penance and a fresh start. During this period, it was becoming clear to me that genuine rehabilitation of the paedophile was a very uncertain prospect, though the clinical experts were not and are not of one mind on this. Whatever about their professional disagreement, the sense that there was no place for the paedophile in the priesthood was growing stronger in me.

Another aspect of the pathology that I came to see was its hiddenness. This was abetted by a general ignorance in the community, but paedophile clergy were extraordinarily adept at concealing their abuse of the young. I have known priests who lived with some of the worst offenders, and it has been presumed at times that they must have known what was going on and turned a blind eye. But my sense is that those living with paedophile clergy knew nothing of the abuse that was going on and were horrified when it came to light. So too there were clergy who were known to have around the presbytery children - usually boys - but nobody I knew imagined that some of them were molesting the children, as it turned out they had been. It is also true that offenders were often incapable of recognising the grave harm they had done. The wrong-doing, indeed the crime, was hidden even from them. Yet they themselves were highly visible in the life of the Church, especially in the life of bishops. The institutional invisibility of the abused was a major reason why, initially at least, there was so much attention given to offending clergy and so little to their victims who were unseen and unheard by comparison.

A further thing I learnt was the complexity of the field of criminal sexual offence, which lies at the intersection of medicine, law and social morality - not to mention, in the case of Catholic clergy, the Church's moral teaching and the discipline of celibacy. For example, I learnt the difference between paedophilia and ephebophilia. The word "paedophilia" may have been strange to me, but the word "ephebophilia" was totally unknown. Where paedophilia refers to the sexual attraction to pre-pubescent children, ephebophilia refers to the sexual attraction to post-pubescent adolescents. A good deal of what was coming to light in the years of my growing awareness was not paedophilia but ephebophilia. In general, it seems to me now that the Church and society generally have not understood well enough the implications of complexity in this area: again, we know more than we did, but there is still a lot of learning to be done.

It was only as more and more cases came to light that I began to understand the scale of the problem. It is true that the number of offenders is a small percentage of the Catholic clergy and that the percentage is about the same as in the wider community. But viewed from another angle,

where even a single offence is appalling, it was an incomprehensible number, with the figure made worse because of the exceptional trust placed in Catholic clergy. That is a trust which has produced wonderful fruit in both priests and people, but it was the same trust which enabled the abuse to happen and made it all the worse. No-one now can deny the scale of the problem, and the urgent task is to go further along the path of understanding and action in a way that is deeply sensitive to the harm done to those who have been abused and determined to do everything possible to root out the evil from the Church.

One question that came to trouble me more, especially when I was working in the Vatican from 1997 to 2002, was whether or not the problem was cultural in the Church. The question was unavoidable as, through those years, I followed closely the drama of the US Church in its attempt to come to grips with the crisis and the way in which the Holy See sought to help, as it did in the unprecedented meeting of the US Cardinals with Pope John Paul II early in 2002. I came to think that the problem was in some way cultural, but that prompted the further question of how: what was it that allowed this canker to grow in the body of the Catholic Church, not just here and there but more broadly? I would part company with some answers to this question, because they seem to me ill-informed, one-dimensional or ideologically driven. There is no one factor that makes abuse of the young by Catholic clergy in some sense cultural. It seems to me rather a complex combination of factors which I do not claim to understand fully, even if I now understand more than I did. I should also say that the combination is not the same from culture to culture or from one era to another. Paedophilia - or the sexual abuse of children - is a universal phenomenon, but it is configured differently from culture to culture and from one historical period to another. So too the factors that have made it cultural within the Catholic Church at this time are configured differently from one place to another, even if there is in some sense a Catholic culture which takes root in different human cultures. But this should not be overstated.

Here I mention briefly several factors which, in my view, may have combined to make the problem cultural rather than merely personal, at least in the Australian situation. My reflection at this point is very much a work in progress and I make no claim that this list is complete or even correct:

One factor was a poor understanding and communication of the Church's teaching on sexuality, shown particularly in a rigorist attitude to the body and sexuality. This was mediated in part through the formative influence of Irish Catholicism in the life of the Church in Australia. We owe the Irish an immense debt of gratitude for what they have given us, but for complex historical reasons the Church in Ireland was prey to the rigorist influence that passed from the Continent to Ireland - often under the name of Jansenism - and found fertile soil there. It then passed into the Irish diaspora of which Australia was part. This rigorist influence led to an implicit denial of the Incarnation, which had people thinking they had to deny their humanity to find their way to the divinity. The irony of this is that the Incarnation - the fundamental belief that God took flesh in Jesus - stands at the very heart of the Catholic sense of a sacramental universe. Jansenism grew from Catholic soil, though it was tinged with Calvinism too. But there was nothing incarnational about Jansenism, and the Catholic Church rejected it, even if its influence has been hard to erase, with traces remaining still. Catholic teaching on sexuality offers deep insights and rich resources which we will need to explore in new ways as we seek to deal with the current crisis.

Clerical celibacy was not in itself a factor, but - like any form of the Christian life lived seriously - it has its perils. When clerical celibacy works well, it is a unique source of spiritual and pastoral fruitfulness in the Church; when it works badly it can be very damaging all round. It becomes especially risky when sundered from the ascetical and mystical life which it presumes: this is a large challenge, especially perhaps for secular clergy in the bustle of their daily lives. The discipline of celibacy may also have been attractive to men in whom there were paedophile tendencies which may not have been explicitly recognised by the men themselves when they entered the seminary.

A further factor was certain forms of seminary training which failed to take proper account of human formation and promoted therefore a kind of institutionalised immaturity. Seminaries were not always seen as schools of discipleship, since faith was taken for granted in a way that looks seriously questionable now. Seminary formation was not tied to a vision of life-long formation, so that a man once ordained was thought to have completed all the formation he would need for his priestly ministry through life. This was fateful, given that paedophile tendencies, usually latent at the time of seminary training, often emerged only after ordination.

Clericalism understood as a hierarchy of power, not service, was also a factor. It was a fruit of seminary training that was inadequate at certain points, and it is almost inevitable once the priesthood and preparation for it are not deeply grounded in the life of faith and discipleship. Clergy could be isolated in ways that were bound to turn destructive. The authority proper to the ordained could become authoritarian, and the hunger for intimacy proper to human beings could become predatory. It is hard to believe that the Church's response would have been so poor had lay people been involved from the start in shaping a response. In more recent years, lay men and women - not all of them Catholic - have been much involved in shaping the Church's response, and that is one reason why we are now doing better. The task belongs not just to the bishops and priests but to the whole Church, with all working together in this fraught situation.

A certain triumphalism in the Catholic Church, a kind of institutional pride, was a further factor. There is much in the Catholic Church, her culture and tradition, about which one can be justifiably proud, as one can be of her achievements in this country; and Easter is always a motive for triumph of the right kind. But there can be a dark side to this which leads to a determination to protect the reputation of the Church at all costs. Through the radical social and cultural changes of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church was seen to have risen above the maelstrom of history and not to be afflicted in the way other Churches and Christian communities were. At least in this country, our institutions in areas such as education, health and welfare were mighty contributions to society as a whole; and this gave the impression that we were a Church that went from strength to strength. Others may suffer decline, but we did not. What mattered was to present well in public in order to affirm to ourselves and to others that we were "the great Church". Such hubris will always have its consequences.

Another factor was the Catholic Church's culture of forgiveness which tends to view things in terms of sin and forgiveness rather than crime and punishment. But in the case of clerical abuse of the young, we are dealing with crime, and the Church has struggled to find the point of convergence between sin and forgiveness on the one hand and crime and punishment on the other. True, sin must be forgiven, but so too must crime be punished. Both mercy and justice must run their course, and do so in a way that converges. This relates to larger questions of how the Church sees her

relationship with society more generally. We are "in the world but not of it": but what precisely does that mean in the here and now? There is also the large question of the relationship between divine and human judgement. The Church insists that it is to God, not to human beings, that final judgement belongs. Yet how does that fit with the need for human judgement when we move within the logic of crime and punishment? We have been slow and clumsy, even at times culpable, in shaping our answer to such questions.

Playing its part too was the culture of the Catholic Church insofar as it favours a certain discretion, which in the case of the Sacrament of Penance becomes an absolute confidentiality. The Church has long spoken of the sins of calumny and detraction. The first refers to the spreading of false allegations against others; the second refers to the spreading of allegations which are true but defamatory. Both are sinful. There are many things known to us about others - certainly known to clergy - but which charity forbids us to spread abroad. This is not always a matter of protecting the reputation of the Church but of protecting the dignity of others in a way that charity commands. Yet this culture of discretion turned dark when it was used to conceal crime and to protect the reputation of the Church or the image of the priesthood in a country that has never known the virulent anti-clericalism of elsewhere.

The Church may also have underestimated the power and subtlety of evil. This may seem strange to say of the Church which is often regarded as taking evil and sin more seriously than do other Churches and Christian communities. But it is evil we are dealing with in the case of sexual abuse of the young; and it is an evil which is not just personal. It is a power which reaches beyond the individual; it seems more metaphysical than moral. A supra-personal power seems to take hold of human beings who are not in themselves wholly evil. But they are in the grip of a power which they can, it seems, do little to understand or control; and it is a power which is hugely destructive in the lives of those they have abused and in their own lives.

None of these factors alone would have made the problem cultural in the Church, but the combination may have done so. Clearly, some have to be abandoned - rigorist notions of the body and sexuality, gaps in seminary training and the kind of clericalism they can produce, triumphalism, the underestimation of evil. Others - like the living of celibacy in the priestly life - need to be purified rather than abandoned. Some - like the Church's culture of forgiveness and discretion - clearly need to be retained, though with a greater awareness of what they can encourage and how they can turn dark.

I am perplexed when I hear it said that the Church - at least in this country - has done nothing about the problem. A great deal has been done by many people, but there is still a great deal to be done. I do not believe that the bishops are simply indulging in "damage-control" and trying to "manage" the problem. That may have been true in the past, but I do not think it is true now. There has been a growing awareness among them that the Church's approach has to be essentially pastoral, with its prime focus on the needs of those who have been abused. That is the thrust of the structures and protocols which have been put in place and are being continually refined as we learn more. What is clear is that there will be no quick fix to this problem, the roots of which go deep and wide. We are in for the long haul. On that journey, there is a need for cool heads and compassionate hearts which resist apocalyptic scenarios and keep striving instead to understand the reality calmly and

comprehensively, always with our eye fixed primarily on the victims we have not seen and the voices we have not heard.

I have asked myself often enough who has been to blame in all this. Clearly the victims were not, even though we have treated them too often as if they were. Just as clearly, the offenders were to blame and must bear the full weight of judgement both human and divine. The bishops? Yes, insofar as they concealed or denied the abuse. The media? Not too often, although there have been appalling instances of trial-by-media with the presumption of innocence cast aside; some reporting has been jaundiced by sensationalism and anti-Catholicism, while other reporting has actually helped the Church see the faces and hear the voices. The lawyers? Only infrequently, even though there have been lawyers who have behaved in ways that have not only dishonoured their profession but also treated victims in ways which themselves have been abusive. At times I have wondered if the whole of society is somehow mysteriously and unconsciously complicit in the phenomenon of child abuse, but in the end it seems to me that the blame-game in any of its forms cannot take us far along the path of healing, reconciliation and reform that lies before us.

All can see that this is a time of crisis for the Catholic Church, even though the nature of the crisis would be understood differently by different people within the Church and outside. The word "crisis" comes from the Greek word *krisis* which means judgement. The Church is under judgement. That judgement is in part human, as many point the accusing finger at the Catholic Church and especially at her leaders. But also and more importantly, the judgement is divine. The God who has called the Church "out of darkness into his own wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9) is acting now as he has done in the past, as the Bible attests: God stands in judgement upon us and calls us into an experience of lamentation that acknowledges sin and looks beyond the disaster that sin has caused to the new future God is preparing for the people he loves. Paradoxically, this lamentation does not preclude the joy of Easter. We normally think that lamentation and joy are mutually exclusive, but now they have to find a home together in the one heart, the heart of the Church, just as they dwell together in the heart of Jesus Christ.

At the moment, the Catholic Church and the bishops in particular are being pounded mightily and dismissed as lacking all credibility or worse. This is hardly surprising, and it can be humiliating. But it is not the end of the world; nor is it the end of the Church. Paradoxically, the Catholic Church has often been at her best when down for the count. History shows that new and unexpected surges of Gospel energy have come not infrequently in the wake of devastation. My hope is that we may now be moving slowly and painfully towards a moment of that kind. That is surely the promise of Easter, which is what sustains me and many others through this troubled time. My deepest and most heartfelt prayer is that the same promise of life out of death may sustain the survivors of sexual abuse whose faces I have come to see and whose voices I have come to hear.

From Archbishop Mark Coleridge

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