

## CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE: What Difference Did Vatican II Make?

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At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the issue of sexual abuse by clergy and religious had not yet surfaced with the ferocity that would emerge in the 1980s and 1990s. It is not surprising then that the issue does not rate a mention in the various documents that arose from the council's deliberations. In that sense there is a certain 'innocence' about the documents, for they were written at a time when the church still enjoyed a relatively unquestioned obedience from its laity (at least until the storm over *Humanae Vitae*), and strong respect from society, as a moral authority to be listened to and esteemed. In many countries, church institutions existed in a protected space, either officially through church-state concordats or unofficially through networks of power and influence that the church could call on to protect itself from overt scandal. Police could be trusted to allow church authorities to 'deal' with matters through internal processes, and newspaper editors to keep matters off the front page. This situation was not to last in the decades following the council.

It was not as if matters pertinent to the sexual abuse problem were not discussed at the council, in particular, matters concerning priestly and religious formation. The document *Optatum Totius* (OT) was primarily concerned with the training of future priests for ministry. Its concern – that seminarians 'are to be warned of the dangers that threaten their chastity especially in present-day society' (OT 10) – sounds rather naive in relation to the crises that were later to emerge. The document is far more concerned with the revision of the seminary curriculum than with the psychosexual problems present in seminarians and ways of achieving some level of maturity in this area. On the other hand, the document on religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC), strikes a more realistic tone, noting that, 'Since the observance of perfect continence touches intimately the deepest instincts of human nature, candidates should neither present themselves for nor be admitted to the



vow of chastity, unless they have been previously tested sufficiently and have been shown to possess the required psychological and emotional maturity' (PC 12).

It is clear of course that Vatican II changed many things within the life of the church. The church moved from a more sectarian stance, where it defined its identity in terms of its opposition to the world, to a stance of increasing dialogue and engagement with the world. Many long-held church disciplines – compulsory Mass on Sunday, not eating meat on Friday, regular confession, strict Lenten observance – began to break down after the council. Theologically things also began to change, with theologians moving away from the shackles of scholasticism and towards biblical and personalist categories which lacked the 'precision' or 'objectivity' of the older forms. In the aftermath of the major sexual abuse scandals that have reached all the way to the Vatican, some have suggested that these shifts, either initiated by the council or justified in its name, shoulder responsibility for a slackening in church discipline which has contributed to the problem of abuse. In an address to the Curia on 20 December 2010, Pope Benedict XVI suggested that some of the problem goes back to poor moral theology which arose after the council: 'It was maintained – even within the realm of Catholic theology – that there is no such thing as evil in itself or good in itself. There is only a "better than" and a "worse than." Nothing is good or bad in itself. Everything depends on the circumstances and on the end in view'.<sup>1</sup> Others have voiced similar concerns – that the reforms initiated by Vatican II were somehow the cause of the problem or at least contributed to it because they led to confusion in areas of sexual ethics and to poor teaching of moral theology. What we need now is a return to past practices and disciplines and this will help reduce or eliminate the problem.

These are strong claims which need to be tested against the evidence. However, before we attend to them, there is at least one way in which the council proved prophetic for our present context. In their deliberations, the council fathers did raise the question of the then emergence of atheism as an intellectually respectable stance. In considering the causes of the rise of atheism, the fathers noted that:

*Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion. (GS 19)*

1 For the full text, see [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2010/december/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20101220\\_curia-auguri\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20101220_curia-auguri_en.html).

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Indeed this was a prophetic utterance. The sexual abuse scandal has become a major stumbling block for faith and a temptation to unbelief. Secular atheists regularly cite the problem of abuse in their attacks on the church, and the church's moral authority has been significantly eroded not only by the fact of abuse, but by the church's failure to deal with abuse in a decisive and forthright manner. Rev Dominik Schwaderlapp, Vicar General of the large Cologne Archdiocese, has stated that, 'The rising number of people who left the Church [in Germany] in 2010 represents a lack of trust suffered by the Church because of abuse cases',<sup>2</sup> and the abuse crises in the previously strongly Catholic countries of Belgium and Ireland have had a devastating effect on church life. The problem of abuse calls into question the church's claims as a religious and moral community and brings the Gospel into disrepute.

Australia has of course not been untouched by the problem of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. The Australian story is nonetheless different from those of other countries. Not an identifiably Catholic country like Belgium or Ireland, the crisis has not been so profoundly unsettling for the whole country; and in Australia, which is not as litigious as the United States, the crisis has not led to the bankruptcy of dioceses and religious orders due to enormous and continuing payouts to victims, usually in the form of punitive payouts designed to punish church bodies for their failures to act against abusers in a timely fashion. The Australian situation has been more contained socially and legally. Many in the pews seem barely aware of the extent of the problem, except in those dioceses particularly badly affected (for example, Maitland-Newcastle, Wollongong). And so the situation has been more 'contained'. Nonetheless it remains a significant factor in the cultural standing of the church in Australia. Institutionally the church's moral authority and social standing have fallen dramatically over the past decades. The stories of abuse and the failures of church authorities to respond adequately to them have had and continue to have an effect.

### CRISIS AND RESPONSE

While cases of sexual abuse were beginning to attract attention in the US during the eighties, the issue began to arise in Australia in the early nineties. One of the more prominent of these was the case of Fr Gerard Ridsdale, a priest of the Ballarat diocese, who has admitted to abusing children from the first years of his priesthood, in the early sixties. This is perhaps the most notorious case of abuse in the Australian church

2 Reported in the *National Post*, 7 April 2011. See <http://life.nationalpost.com/2011/04/07/more-german-catholics-quit-church-over-sex-abuse/>.



because of the length of time the abuser was able to continue his activities and the abject failure of church authorities to deal with them despite being very aware that he was abusing children. He was repeatedly moved from parish to parish, with his thirty-year reign of terror only coming to a conclusion with his arrest and trial in the early nineties. Ridsdale was an out-of-control paedophile whose activities were essentially protected by the inaction of church authorities for over thirty years.

The publicity around this case, together with growing reports from the United States, were precipitating factors allowing survivors of sexual abuse by clergy and religious to find their voice and begin to organise themselves into support and lobby groups.<sup>3</sup> Initially this process began in Melbourne. The first survivors' group to form was Broken Rites, which developed a large and continuing network of survivors, coordinating information on church abusers, and providing peer support and practical guidance to survivors of sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> Their web page identifies over two hundred criminal or civil cases relating to abuse by Catholic clergy and religious. The remarkable longevity of this group is a testament to the depth of the problem and the personal commitment of those involved in it.

At much the same time the Anglican Church in Melbourne had initiated a project, Project Anna, to investigate the problem of sexual violence in church communities.<sup>5</sup> The final report on this process helped identify that the problem of sexual abuse was not confined to the sexual assault of children. Adult women in pastoral and counselling relationships with clergy were also subject to sexual exploitation and abuse. This insight drew on parallels with other professional relationships, such as those with doctors, including psychiatrists, where it is well recognised that the sexualising of such relationships is unethical due to the power imbalance that is present. While church-funded, Project Anna operated within CASA (Centre Against Sexual Assault) House, attached to the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne. This project became a focal point for resourcing women who had been exploited by their clergy or ministers.

Through the encouragement and assistance of personnel working with Project Anna another support group was established in the Sydney region, Friends of Susanna.<sup>6</sup>

3 One should also note the growing body of literature that emerged in the eighties on the problem of the sexual assault of women and the abuse of children in families. This also provided important resources for those seeking a better grasp of the issue for the church.

4 Some twenty years later, Broken Rites continues in this role. See <http://brokenrites.alphalink.com.au/>.

5 For an account of this project, see Helen Last and Anne Hall, 'Violence against Women in the Church Community: Project Anna', in *Without Consent: Confronting Adult Sexual Violence*, ed. Patricia Weiser Eastaugh (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1993). The full text is available at <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/previous%20series/proceedings/1-27/~media/publications/proceedings/20/hall.ashx>.

6 The book, Neil Ormerod and Thea Ormerod, *When Ministers Sin: Sexual Abuse in the Churches* (Alexandria,

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This was a small interdenominational group of survivors and support persons who lobbied for changes in church policies in dealing with survivors and abusive clergy, and provided mutual support and encouragement in their dealings with church authorities. Through sympathetic clergy within the Catholic Church, this group obtained the then current policies of the Catholic Church, which were largely dominated by legal and insurance considerations. The release of this documentation to the media, and a subsequent *Four Corners* program, brought the problem of sexual abuse to the public's attention. It also highlighted the inadequacy of the church's response to the problem at that time. The Friends of Susanna also played a role in mediating a meeting between Bishop Geoffrey Robinson and survivors of sexual abuse.

This process of consciousness-raising was furthered by two conferences, one in Melbourne in 1994, organised through CASA House,<sup>7</sup> and a second in 1996, organised by a loose coalition of groups that brought together survivors of clergy abuse and survivors of abuse by members of other professional groups (mainly medical or counselling personnel).<sup>8</sup> One presentation at the Sydney conference was by the Professional Standards Committee of the Catholic Church, which included Bishop Geoffrey Robinson and Fr John Usher, the Director of Sydney Centacare, the Catholic social welfare agency of the Sydney Archdiocese.

The Professional Standards Committee soon produced two documents, *Towards Healing* (1996) and *Integrity in Ministry* (1997).<sup>9</sup> These documents set out the policies, principles and procedures that the Catholic Church committed itself to in responding to the needs of victims and survivors of abuse, and to those who perpetrated that abuse.<sup>10</sup> Both documents were to go through various iterations and reviews over the years, with the most recent versions appearing in 2010. These documents incorporate comments made by Pope Benedict XVI in his visit to Sydney during World Youth Day,

NSW: Millennium Books, 1995), grew largely out of the experiences within this group. It was, as far as I know, the first Australian book on sexual abuse within the churches. Also deserving mention is the work of the Australian legal academic, Patrick Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997). Parkinson was employed by the Australian bishops to review the effectiveness of their policies and procedures.

- 7 For the papers of the conference, see S. Bartley and H. MacDonald, eds, *Sexual Assault and Other Forms of Violence within the Australian Community: Religious and Faith Perspectives* (Melbourne: CASA House, 1994).
- 8 For the papers, see Christian Boekenbauer, Leah Michael, Neil Ormerod and Anne Wansbrough, eds, *Violating Trust: Professional Sexual Abuse*, Proceedings of the First Australian and New Zealand Conference on Sexual Exploitation by Health Professionals, Psychotherapists and Clergy (Sydney, 1998).
- 9 The first of these was written by the Professional Standards Committee, with little input from survivors. The second document through the work of Bishop Robinson did involve consultation with survivors.
- 10 The documents provided a standard for all dioceses in Australia, except Melbourne; and for all religious orders, except the Jesuits. The Jesuits were later to accept the national standard for handling their own cases of abuse. Melbourne developed its own processes for handling revelations of sexual abuse.



where he personally expressed 'deep sorry for the pain and suffering the victims have endured' and acknowledged that the perpetrators of abuse 'have caused great pain and have damaged the Church's witness'.

## IMPLEMENTATION

It is one thing to produce statements of policies, principles and procedures, and another thing altogether to carry them out. The anecdotal evidence suggests that the results in implementation have been patchy. The church has had to struggle with various issues, particularly claims from victims that they have been required to sign non-disclosure commitments in order to receive compensation, and the complexities of police reporting vis-à-vis disclosure to church authorities. What is clear is that the issue has not attracted as much attention as it did in the early to midnineties. While clearly far from perfect, it would appear that some lessons have been learnt, if not fully absorbed. Broken Rites still provides an important clearing house for information and networking for victims of abuse who feel that church responses have been inadequate.

There is, however, one area where there appears to be a considerable gap between the intention and performance of the church. The latest version of the document, *Integrity in Ministry*, specifies on five occasions that those in ministry should be under suitable forms of professional supervision:

*3.2 As part of their vocational commitment clergy and religious also continue to develop the pastoral and professional skills their ministries require.*

*Among the behavioural standards that follow from this principle are: ...*

- *participation in regular professional supervision;*

*4.1 In response to their vocation clergy and religious are committed to develop and maintain the pastoral skills that their particular ministry or way of life requires.*

*Among the behavioural standards that follow from this principle are:*

- *reflecting regularly on one's pastoral practice with a competent supervisor or colleague;*

*4.5 Pastoral care requires that a pastoral relationship be terminated when it becomes reasonably clear that the person seeking support is not benefiting. In such a case the person will be offered help to find another source of assistance.*

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*Among the behavioural standards that follow from this principle are:*

- *reviewing pastoral relationships with a colleague or supervisor to assess their effectiveness when that is in doubt;*

*5.2 Religious and clergy who have responsibility to supervise the work of others witness justice by ensuring just working conditions.*

*Among the behavioural standards that follow from this principle are: ...*

- *providing adequately resourced access to training, professional development and professional supervision;*

*7.4 Bishops and religious leaders share a responsibility for promoting and encouraging the health and well being, just working conditions and professional development of the clergy and religious in their Dioceses and Congregations.*

*Among the behavioural standards that follow from this principle are: ...*

- *providing structures and environments and providing resources and opportunities to support the professional development and professional supervision for clergy and religious in accordance with paragraphs 3.2, 4.1 and 4.2.*

This requirement for professional supervision, repeatedly referred to in the document, follows parallels in other helping professions, particularly counselling professions, where such supervision is a first line of defence and provides for the prevention of abuse by the maintenance of healthy boundaries between the professional and the client. If implemented, these provisions would require every priest in pastoral ministry to be in a regular supervisory relationship for their professional supervision. There is little evidence that this requirement has been implemented as a matter of course in every diocese.

### THE CAUSES OF ABUSE<sup>11</sup>

As I noted earlier in this essay, some have attempted to lay the blame for the problem of abuse on shifting attitudes to sexual morality that arose post-Vatican II. Moral relativism is viewed as a significant contributor to the problem, if not its major cause. It is important to review the evidence for such a claim as it has consequences for the

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, sin has no cause, but there may be antecedent factors which incline or contribute to the occurrence of abuse. These factors may not be evil in themselves, but they can provide the opportunities for temptations to arise.



ongoing formation of priests and religious. The proposal is suggesting that the older, more strict forms of formation, where morality was more black and white, together with the reintroduction of older forms of piety, would help alleviate the problem of sexual abuse in the church.

It is not difficult to find evidence which would call this proposal into question. In fact the most notorious cases of sexual abuse in the Australian church occurred in institutional settings in the 1940s–60s by men (and sometimes women) who were thoroughly trained in the strict morality and rigorous piety of the pre-Vatican II church. There are two such cases that come to mind. The first was the abuse of young boys at Bindoon, Castledare, Clontarf and Tardun in Western Australia by Christian Brothers running those institutions. As a Senate report into the abuse there noted:

*4.2 The accounts of sexual abuse and assault at these four institutions are horrendous, supporting and amplifying the UK Committee's description of 'quite exceptional depravity'. The stories from the ex-residents of Bindoon, Castledare, Clontarf, and Tardun provide an account of systemic criminal sexual assault and predatory behaviour by a large number of the Brothers over a considerable period of time. Evidence was given of boys being abused in many ways for the sexual gratification of the Brothers, of boys being terrified in bed at night as Brothers stalked the dormitories to come and take children to their rooms, of boys as 'pets' of the Brothers being repeatedly sodomised, and of boys being pressured into bestial acts.<sup>12</sup>*

This is a damning indictment of those who perpetrated the abuse in those institutions. What adds to the tragedy, however, is that these abusive activities were known to church authorities and they did not act to protect the boys under their care.

A similar, if less well-known occurrence, was in the orphanage at Neerkol, in the Rockhampton diocese. One priest who served as the resident priest at the orphanage had a fifteen-year reign of terror with the children there, sexually abusing young boys repeatedly, often as they served as altar boys going to and from Mass in outlying churches. This abuse occurred in the 1950s and 1960s and cannot be attributed to any slackening in training or moral formation due to the influence of Vatican II.<sup>13</sup> This priest eventually died as a respected and loved figure in the Rockhampton Catholic

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<sup>12</sup> Senate Committee, Canberra, part of 'Lost Innocents: Righting the Record', August 2001, quoted in <http://www.multiline.com.au/~johnm/ethics/exceptional.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> For a chilling and graphic account of the abusive activities of Fr Jack Anderson, see the story of one of his survivors, David Owen, at <http://abuseatneerkol.blogspot.com.au/>.

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community without his history of abuse ever coming to light during his lifetime. His successor at the orphanage, however, was eventually imprisoned at the age of eighty for his sexual abuse of children in his pastoral care.

Of course Vatican II did bring about many changes in priestly and religious formation: changes in piety, in intellectual and moral education, and in personal psychological scrutiny. Many religious orders experienced a significant decline in numbers during those years, a fact often attributed to their movement away from the previously more rigorous piety and conformity to church teaching. Some new religious orders and movements emerged during this time which made a point of upholding the more traditional forms of religious life, piety and formation. These groups were often praised by church authorities as exemplars of what religious life should be about, and they often succeeded in attracting new members while other religious orders were experiencing decline. In Australia one such order that attracted new members was the Brothers of Gerard Magella. This order specialised in a catechetical mission to youth, working in state schools and running camps and retreats for youth which mixed religious formation with youth activities, and eventually ran schools and parishes. As one report noted, 'Its members wore conservative clerical dress which included a neck-to-ankle soutane, or cassock, with a wide cummerbund and a cross'.<sup>14</sup> What emerged after some decades of operation, however, was that the principals of the order, its founder and other leaders, were sexually abusing their own novices. Three leaders of the order were eventually imprisoned for their activities. The order was subsequently disbanded.<sup>15</sup>

It should be clear from these examples that holding on to the standards of the pre-Vatican II church offers no immunity from abuse. It is quite possible for abusers to live outwardly a life of piety and moral rectitude while engaging secretly in abusive activities. In fact the ranks of abusers cuts right across the lines of conservatives and liberals, with both sides having their fair share of abusive clergy and religious. While the more strict approach can lead to sexual repression and the outbreak of sexuality in perverted ways, a more liberal approach can lead priests to think their sexual activities are minor indiscretions. Self-deception wears many masks.

<sup>14</sup> Alex Mitchell, *Sun Herald*, Sunday, 16 November 1997, available at <http://www.fingerplate.com.au/fingerplate-articles/1997/11/16/the-priests-of-prey/>.

<sup>15</sup> There are some parallels here with the Legionaries of Christ, a group which cultivated a very conservative demeanour and earned the protection and patronage of various Vatican officials. It subsequently emerged that its founder, Fr Marcial Maciel, sexually abused novices in his order, fathered children with various women, and even, it has been reported, sexually abused his own children.



The other suggestion, usually made from more liberal ranks, is that the problem of abuse arises because of compulsory celibacy within the Catholic priesthood and in religious life. There are serious questions that need to be faced about the impact of celibacy on the development of a mature psychosexual identity, but one should also note that the problem of sexual abuse arises in a number of settings, notably the family (incest) and other professions which deal with children. Men who abuse children are often married or in other adult sexual relationships. It is simplistic to identify celibacy as a cause of abuse and the statistics would seem to indicate that the rates of abuse of children by priests reflect percentages in the overall population.<sup>16</sup> The situation of sexual exploitation in adult pastoral relationships is probably more complex. Self-reporting surveys of ministers in various denominations suggest a figure as high as 20 to 30% of ministers reporting inappropriate sexual contact with people in their pastoral care.<sup>17</sup> But again these high figures are in denominations where ministers are not required to be celibate. These abusive occurrences may vary from one-off events never to be repeated, to the beginnings of a relationship which becomes permanent (which may result in divorce where the minister is currently married; or in leaving ministry/priesthood, in the case of a Catholic priest), to the multiple exploitative relationships of a serial abuser. Here celibacy may well be a factor as a priest acts out of his own needs for intimacy and human contact, with no regard for its effects on the other. Still it is the case that the priest who is a serial abuser with multiple relationships faces less censure from church authorities than a priest who decides to marry and is thus forced to leave the priesthood permanently. This is surely a point not lost on priests at the coalface.

More perceptive are those, such as Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, who identify a nexus between the sacred, power and abuse.<sup>18</sup> Ministers operate within a realm of sacred power or authority. In the Catholic tradition this is tied in with their sacramental and liturgical role and their leadership of the life of the community. It is not a matter of rejecting the reality of this power, but of learning to live and work with it

16 It is very difficult to get precise figures on this, both in the wider population and among priests and religious, but the common estimates in the general population are around 5%. See Michael C. Seto, 'Pedophilia', *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 5 (2009): 391–407.

17 See J. Jordan-Lake, 'Conduct Unbecoming a Preacher', *Christianity Today* 36 (10 January 1992): 26–30, who reports a figure of 23%. See also Tim LaHoye, *When Ministers Fail, Can They Be Restored?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), who reports a figure as high as 33%.

18 Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2008). Some would argue that this work suffers from adopting too wide a perspective, including theological issues which are not adequately dealt with. See my review in *Australasian Catholic Record* 85 (2008), 253–4, or, more fully, 'The Knowledge and Authority of Jesus: A Response to Bishop Robinson', *Australasian Catholic Record* 88 (2011): 88–97.

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responsibly.<sup>19</sup> However, it is very important to distinguish between one's own personal sense of power and the structural power of the office one holds. The disparity between one's personal sense of powerlessness and the reality of structural power can go in one of two problematic directions. The priest may discover the reality of structural power, and use it to overcome his sense of personal inadequacy. He learns to enjoy the power he exercises and the inflated sense of self that derives from it. Alternatively he may never discover the reality of the structural power he has. He then exercises it in a thoughtless, perhaps even offhand, way, unaware of the ramifications of his actions, and certainly without recognition of the power he has or of its effects on others. Neither of these two positions is conducive to the responsible exercise of power. While paedophilia is a sexual aberration with complex psychological antecedents, the far more common issue of sexual exploitation in pastoral settings is more an issue of such structural power and its misuse.

When I first began working in a seminary environment, in the nineties, it struck me that, while the students studied the sacrament of marriage in their course on moral theology, they studied ordination and priesthood in their course in systematic theology. I thought then, 'They study the morality of marriage and the theology of priesthood; what they need to do is study the theology of marriage and the morality of priesthood'. As far as I know, no seminary in Australia has as a requirement for those training for priesthood a prolonged reflection on the ethics of priesthood, on the uses and misuses of power in personal and communal relations, on priests' financial duties, accountabilities, obligations, and so on. This oversight should be rectified.

A final issue that should be addressed is that of clerical culture. There exists among priests, and among religious in their particular order, a certain common culture borne of the shared experience of formation, training, education, and, at times, common life (seminary, novitiates, etc.). This builds bonds of spontaneous identification with the ones with whom they have shared these experiences. Those who are outside the group, who have not shared in their common formation, find it difficult to enter into the mentality of the group. For priests in particular this is known as the 'clerical club' – with its sense of camaraderie, fraternity and self-identification. Its roots can probably be traced back to the reforms of Trent and the establishment of seminaries for the training of priests, replacing a much more ad hoc and localised system of training. Seminaries

<sup>19</sup> I argue this more fully in Neil Ormerod, 'Power and Authority: A Response to Bishop Cullinane', *Australasian Catholic Record* 82 (2005): 154–62.



took young men out of their families and communities to provide a more thorough education and to shape them into a certain religious culture; intentionally or not it also fostered a common bond among those who shared in this common experience.

While this may not actually contribute to the occurrence of abuse (though anecdotal evidence would suggest a good deal of misogyny when priests get together), it may help account for the failure of church authorities to address cases of abuse when they arise. Those authorities themselves belong to this same culture. Their spontaneous identification is with the abusive priest or religious, not with their victim. They may well have faced the same temptations, particularly in relation to situations involving exploitation of pastoral relationships. They may well have crossed the line themselves. Their first response is likely to be one of feeling sorry for the abuser. One priest, on hearing from a victim of a fellow priest's repeated sexualising of his pastoral relations with various young women cried out, 'The poor man, struggling with his celibacy'. There was no sense at all of the trail of destruction caused and the faith damaged. Immediately it became a problem of personal spirituality, narcissistically appropriated, 'poor me/him'; not anger at the spiritual violation of another person. There is often an inability to enter into the perspective of the victim of abuse. Like the priests and Levites in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), it is easier to walk past on the other side than to hear the cries of betrayed trust and mental anguish that arise.

### A QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

This reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan should not be seen as incidental to the problem of abuse in the church. As the work of René Girard has demonstrated, one of the distinctive and history-shaping features of Christian revelation is the uncovering of the 'innocence of the victim' and the self-identification by Jesus with the victims of history, to the point of his own death on the cross.<sup>20</sup> One could also refer to Jesus' identification with victims in the final judgment scene of Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 28), and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). According to Girard, Christianity reveals the victimage mechanism whereby victims are assumed to be guilty, thus justifying their suffering and scapegoating. In this sense Christianity is anti-sacrificial, the rejection of the sacrifice of the innocent, of blaming the victim for their suffering. Faith in Jesus calls us to learn to identify with the victim, not the perpetrator, of abuse.

<sup>20</sup> For example, René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).

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This is why the church's handling of the problem of abuse is not just a scandal, not just a moral failing that can be forgiven without further comment. It touches on the church's very identity in its adherence to what is revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The repeated references in the New Testament to the once-and-for-all nature of the sacrificial death of Jesus carries the weight of a religious and moral imperative to put an end to sacrificial violence and the creation of victims.<sup>21</sup> To date, church authorities, and just as often the communities they lead, have failed in this most basic aspect of Christian revelation, of learning to identify with the victim. Until this lesson is learnt there will be no resolution of the crisis we face.

### CONCLUSION

I noted in the opening paragraphs that Vatican II said nothing directly about the problem of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. The council was still largely in an age of innocence, as was wider society, which had yet to face up to the issues of sexual violence against women and children. In many ways wider society took the lead in this area, particularly through the impact of the feminist movement, with its criticisms of patriarchal culture and the use of male power against women and children.<sup>22</sup> The church has been relatively slow to allow these insights to take hold within its own operations. Now, with the sexual abuse scandal taking hold of a number of Catholic communities in various countries, and claims of inaction and complicity reaching to the very top of the church, concerted reform must occur. While there was no mention of the problem at Vatican II one can be sure that if there is to be a Vatican III, it will be firmly on the agenda.

21 The theme of Jesus' death being 'once and for all' occurs in a number of NT authors, namely Paul (Rom 6:10; 1 Cor 15:6), the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28) and 1 Peter (1 Pet 3:18). It is clearly a significant element in the NT understanding of the death of Jesus as putting an end to sacrifice.

22 See, for example, Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).