

Panel 2: structure, governance and culture—focus on clericalism

1. The culture of the church's governance is shaped by bonds of obedience (priests to bishops, bishops to pope, religious to community superior) and loyalty to the church itself to which they are personally committed. It has many similarities to other authority-based hierarchies (police, military) which tend towards total personal commitment, strong formation processes into the corporate culture (approx. 6 years seminary training), and an internal system of rewards and punishments. Such cultures are prone to self-protection, denial of problems, and resistance to change.

2. The culture of obedience and loyalty are given extra reinforcement from their religious dimension. Those in religious orders are both subject to and bearers of religious authority. Their bishops (or religious superiors) exercise a religious authority over them which requires their obedience. However, as priests, they share in that religious authority as they exercise it over those in their pastoral care. This religious authority adds an extra dimension to the suffering of abuse victims, both in the perpetration and in the response of religious leaders.

3. Celibacy is an important aspect of this culture.¹ Celibacy means that priests have no other competing loyalties (e.g. wife and family) to turn to for support in times of conflict or stress. While the reasons and purposes of celibacy are various—cultic purity, commitment to mission, inheritance issues—the end result is a consolidation of a culture of commitment and loyalty to the institution over and against competing claims—this is particularly the case with diocesan priests who often live in relative isolation. Priests enter a complete society, from ordination to grave, where obedience and loyalty are rewarded and perceived disobedience and disloyalty are marginalised. Personal patronage is just as important as ability and talent in gaining promotion within the Church.

4. Celibacy also means that priests are relatively naïve in relation to questions of human sexuality. Issues of sexual abuse have been viewed more in terms of failings in celibacy and sexual ethics rather than as abuses of power with destructive impact on their victims. The priest-perpetrator is a member of the same clerical club, with whom those in authority spontaneously identify. They do not normally identify with the victim who is viewed as attacking not only the perpetrator, but the whole authority and credibility of the church. The “problem” is then not the perpetrator of abuse, but the victim who speaks out who threatens the culture.

5. These various factors—common training and formation processes; religiously motivated obedience and loyalty; a shared sense of religious authority and power; the isolation generated by celibacy—combine to create the culture generally referred to as “clericalism”. As a culture, clericalism presents victims of abuse with what appears as a closed shop, an opaque brick wall, against which they struggle to find a point of entry. They find themselves as outsiders seeking entry into a very different world, one which operates according to its own rules and culture that they just do not understand.

6. Some of these factors that contribute to the culture of clericalism are intractable, in the sense that they are intrinsic to the role (especially the religious elements). What is needed is a program to ameliorate the worst aspects of this clericalism. Here it is worth noting that

¹ I have prepared a background paper on celibacy for the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, which I have also supplied to the Royal Commission.

Pope Francis has been a regular and fierce critic of the culture of clericalism, calling for personal vigilance and conversion on the part of all those in ministry. I would suggest three elements that are of particular relevance to shifting the probabilities within the Church for lessening the culture of clericalism as it impacts on victims of abuse:

7. Regular pastoral supervision for all those in ministry. This was mandated by the document “Integrity in Ministry” and reiterated a number of times in that document.² It is standard practice for a number of caring professions and within other churches, yet it remains largely unimplemented in the Catholic Church. Evidence of regular supervision should be a requirement for the granting of priestly faculties in a diocese. Priests who do not undergo supervision should be denied any church legal support if the priest is accused of abuse.

8. Ongoing professional and theological education. This was mandated by the “Final Declaration of the Interdicasterial Meeting of the Roman Curia with a Representative of The Bishops of Australia” (often referred to as the “Statement of Conclusions”, 1998).³ It notes that: “The pastoral demands of the age, as well as the priest’s personal development require that his intellectual formation must not be seen as something pertaining to the seminary period of life only, but must be seen as a continuing, on- going and permanent aspect of his personal response to his vocation. The priest then must personally develop a systematic approach to on-going study as well as participate in the opportunities provided by his bishop, the diocese and the Episcopal Conference for in-service training.” None of this has been implemented. Evidence of ongoing education should be a requirement for the granting of faculties in a diocese. Other churches require such education as an annual criterion for ongoing ministry.

9. Seminary training in the professional ethics of ministry. The theological formation of seminarians should include a mandated unit on the professional ethics of ministry, with a focus on issues of power and its misuse by ministers. This would include case-studies of abuse and its consequences, as well of the Church’s handling of such cases. As far as I know there are no such courses presently offered in the Catholic Church formation program for priests.

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² See my contribution, “Clergy sexual abuse – what difference did Vatican II make?”, in Neil Ormerod et al., *Vatican II: Reception and Implementation in the Australian Church* (Melbourne: John Garrett, 2012), 213-25

³ This document was controversial at the time, but like many church documents it has largely been ignored. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20000630_dichiarazione-vescovi-australiani%20_it.html.