

## **Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse**

### **Panel 7.2 – Support and supervision of working priests and religious**

***1. To what extent have any of the following issues, identified by the Royal Commission through case studies, submissions, private sessions, and a review of the literature regarding child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions, contributed to the occurrence of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions or affected the institutional response to this abuse?***

***(a) ongoing formation of working priests and religious;***

***(b) support for and supervision of working priests and religious.***

- I cannot definitively say (nor, I believe, could anyone) that better ongoing formation programs and support and supervision of working priests and religious would prevent child sexual abuse in Catholic Church institutions, but it would surely help considerably. I believe that initial formation for ministry is often inadequate and after ordination a commitment to life-long learning and reflection on ministerial practice with professionally trained supervisors is mostly absent.
- My expertise is in the area of formation for pastoral ministry with focus in the last twenty years on consultative supervision. The purpose of Consultative Supervision is to be “a regular, protected time for facilitated, in-depth reflection on practice.” *(Adapted from Bond & Holland, 1998)*

It is called Consultative Supervision rather than ‘Supervision’ as it is a working relationship between two professionals where a supervisee reflects on his/her practice in the workplace and receives feedback from the supervisor and guidance, if appropriate. It is not a process of oversight or imposing discipline. I note that it is also not therapy or spiritual direction. I mention these topics of oversight, discipline, therapy and spiritual direction because they have their place in formation programs but Consultative Supervision on ministerial practice has not been widely incorporated into formation programs in the Catholic Church.

The role of the supervisor at all times respects supervisees’ experience, skills and learning style and establishes a trusting environment. This builds resilience in a changing workplace environment and encourages appropriate self-care in the supervisee. Consultative Supervision invites supervisees to be open to explore their own professional and ministerial journey. It often empowers supervisees to claim their authority as professional practitioners and it challenges supervisees to undertake new opportunities for personal and professional growth.

*As a well-known writer says:*

*“Supervision interrupts practice. It wakes us up to what we are doing. When we are alive to what we are doing, we wake up to what is, instead of falling asleep in the comfort stories of our clinical routines and daily practice.. The supervisory voice acts as an irritator interrupting repetitive stories (comfort stories) and facilitating the creation of new stories. (Sheila Ryan)*

Consultative Supervision on its own will not prevent child sexual abuse unless there is a deeper understanding of the role and purpose of priesthood, the person's ongoing psychological and sexual development and ministry appropriate in to-day's world. The deepest questions to be addressed at all levels in the Church are around the malaise of clericalism with its misunderstanding of power and authority and the specialness of ordination.

If these were addressed then changes would have to take place at every level of formation, both initial and ongoing, and how authority is exercised.

For example the following issues would need to be addressed:

1. What in-depth psychological and spiritual assessment takes place before a person is accepted into a formation program for the priesthood and religious living? Do Church authorities listen to recommendations given to them about personnel before they enter formation programs?
2. How does the person in training understand the issues of "service" and "privilege?"
3. How does the person in training understand life-long learning, regular reflection on ministry practice, and personal issues that may arise, ongoing professional development, and accountability to appropriate authorities?
4. What place does culture play in a person's understanding of ministry practice and of appropriate professional and personal boundaries?

Supervision: Reflection on practice with a professionally trained pastoral supervisor produces best results if integrated into the formation program from the first year of formation. The supervisor can act as a reflector on the progress of formation with the person through supervision so that they see the growth taking place in themselves and note areas that need further work in their practice. This process can assist them throughout their ministerial lives. The process is to be one of "health" not of "oversight" and it is always contracted as a confidential time, where the limits of confidentiality are always outlined, so that the person can work through the issues that may arise.

I would highly recommend that pastoral supervision be a requirement within seminary training and ongoing formation of priests and religious in the Catholic Church for a couple of years after ordination or profession, as it is in some other denominations. People need support in the early years of their ministerial life as the issues that arise can be very confronting and challenging in those first few years.

It is hoped that if personnel have seen the benefit of Consultative Supervision and on-going learning in their formative years that they will continue throughout their ministerial lives.