

# Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church

RECLAIMING THE  
SPIRIT OF JESUS

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson

Foreword by Donald Cozzens



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again and, for the first time in my life, named it as sexual abuse. With the help of counsellors, I became conscious of some of the effects it had had on me.

Flowing from all of this, my problems with the church's response to the revelations of sexual abuse ran deep and reached up to the highest levels of the church, for I was one of many people crying out for strong and compassionate leadership on this matter and trying to do my best without the support of that leadership. I felt that here was the perfect opportunity for the papacy to fulfill its most basic role of being the rock that holds the church together, but this did not happen, and the church fractured. I found it impossible to accept that I must give 'submission of mind and will' to most words written by a pope, but a failure to give leadership in a crisis seemed to count for little. I felt that the demand was being made that I give my submission to the silence as well as to the words, and I could not do this.

When, in front of several journalists at a public meeting, I answered a victim's question by saying that I was not happy with the level of support we were receiving from 'Rome', I received an official letter (7 August 1996) expressing 'the ongoing concern of the Congregation for Bishops that you have in recent months expressed views that are seriously critical of the magisterial teaching and discipline of the Church.' I was told that 'in a recent audience, the Holy Father has been fully apprised of your public position on these issues and He has shown 'serious preoccupation in your regard.' Two months later (16 October 1996) I received a further letter informing me that 'The relevant documentation will be forwarded, for its information and review, to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith', implying that I was suspected of some form of heresy.

I admit that I felt personally hurt by this criticism of the only truthful reply I could have given to a room full of victims, but it also led me to the conclusion that an authority that had to be defended in a manner as heavy as this must have had serious doubts about its own response to abuse.

There has never been a perfect church and there never will be. I must always work within an imperfect church, and must never forget that I am myself an imperfect member of that imperfect church, contributing my problems and failures as well as my assistance. Sometimes, however, circumstances can arise where there is only a fine line

between accepting that I must work within an imperfect church and becoming complicit in the harm that those imperfections are causing to people.

I eventually came to the point where I felt that, with the thoughts that were running through my head, I could not continue to be a bishop of a church about which I had such profound reservations. I resigned my office as Auxiliary Bishop in Sydney and began to write this book about the very foundations of power and sex within the church.

I believe that in this book I describe a better church, a church that is not contrary to the mind of Jesus Christ. How others will react to the book is up to them, but the case for reform must be most seriously considered, for we must confront all factors that have in any way contributed either to abuse or to the inadequate response to abuse.

## THANKS

I acknowledge the assistance of a number of people who have read all or part of a draft of this book and offered valuable comments that saved me from errors and gave greater depth to the book. It says much about the need for change that, in the atmosphere that prevails within the church, I would be creating difficulties for them if I gave their names. They know who I mean, and to each one of them I offer my sincere thanks for their comments and support.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The document that is always referred to as the response of the pope to abuse is a letter to the bishops of the USA of 11 June 1993. This letter, however, highlights the problems, for it is addressed to the bishops, not to victims; it makes no call to the church like the one I have just outlined; it spends almost a third of its length decrying 'sensationalism', i.e. blaming the media; and the only solution it offers is that of prayer. Needless to say, I am in favour of prayer, but I would hate to limit my response to victims to saying, 'I will pray for you.'

<sup>2</sup> See David Ranson, of the Catholic Institute of Sydney, in his article 'The Climate of Sexual Abuse', *The Furrow*, 53 (July/August 2002), pp.387-397. In much of what follows I am indebted to this article.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent summary of the point psychology has reached and for nineteen pages of bibliography on the subject, see *Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Literature*, The John Jay College Research Team, Karen J Terry, principal investigator and Jennifer Tallon, primary researcher. See also *The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States*, a Research Study conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Both documents may be found on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at <http://www.usccb.org/ocyp/webstudy.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> In much of the literature there is a distinction between paedophiles, who are attracted to children under the age of twelve, and ephebophiles, who are attracted to minors over the age of twelve.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen J. Rossetti, *A Tragic Grace, The Catholic Church and Child Sexual Abuse*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1996, Chapter Four, *Red Flags for Child Sexual Abuse*, pp.64-79.