

Wrestling with Abuse
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In June this year, a middle-aged man drafted a formal complaint with Sister Angela Ryan from the Australian Catholic Church's National Committee for Professional Standards (NCPS). He alleged that while at a Young Christian Workers holiday camp at Phillip Island, Victoria, in January 1961, a visiting seminarian known as "Big George" had molested boys by fondling their genitals during spontaneous wrestling matches. He alleges that he recognised this man in television footage in the 1990s as the then Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr George Pell. He told family members about it at that time, and in 2002 reported the incidents to a Melbourne priest, at whose suggestion he approached NCPS.

Its chairman, Sydney Auxiliary Bishop Geoffrey Robinson initially decided that the Committee could not investigate the complaint because complaints about bishops needed to be dealt with by their Roman superiors, not their own NCPS.

However, in August 2002, when it became known that the complainant, dissatisfied with this decision, had approached an investigative reporter at the Melbourne Age to have his claims further investigated, the NCPS decision was reversed, and the matter became very public as George Pell, now the Archbishop of Sydney and arguably Australia's most powerful Catholic churchman, stood aside temporarily from office, vehemently denying the allegations.

In the media frenzy that followed, personal details about the complainant's criminal and health history were shamelessly leaked in an apparent attempt to discredit him. The NCPS (now with Adelaide Archbishop Phillip Wilson and Brother Michael Hill as acting co-chairs) appointed retired Victorian Supreme Court judge, Alec Southwell QC, a non-Catholic, to conduct an investigation following the NCPS protocols (cf. http://www.catholic.org.au/statements/sexual_abuse_th2001_1.htm).

Allegations of sexual abuse by clergy are just that: allegations, even when levelled against very senior clergy. And one would be unwise to forget the troubling case of Chicago's late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, falsely accused in 1993 of molesting Steven Cook, who later recanted his accusations about "events" from his youth "remembered" during adult therapy.

Nonetheless, those who have followed the recent international history of the Catholic Church will not share the level of surprise in the media and general community about the Australian events. Abuse of this kind was too prevalent

in and systematically “covered up” by the Church throughout most of the last century:

- Santa Fe's Archbishop Robert Sanchez resigned in 1993 after “60 Minutes” reported that he had been sexually involved with 3 teen aged girls;
- Cardinal Hans Hermann Groer was forced to resign as Austria's top churchman in 1995 after being accused of sexually abusing a schoolboy 20 years earlier;
- Father Ron John McKeirnan, the former deputy-director of Catholic Education in Brisbane, Australia was gaoled for 3 years for child sex offences in 1996;
- in the same year, Canadian bishop, Hubert O'Connor, was sentenced to 2½ years in prison for sex crimes against native Indian women at a boarding school he ran in the 1960s;
- Archbishop Juliusz Paetz, a close friend of Pope John Paul II, resigned in March this year as Archbishop of Poznan in Poland after a dozen young seminarians accused him of sexual abuse;
- on March 8, 2002, Anthony O'Connell, the Catholic Bishop of Palm Beach announced his resignation after a former seminarian disclosed that he had been sexually abused by O'Connell in the 1970's when O'Connell was his rector. Bishop O'Connell had succeeded
- Bishop Keith Simons who had resigned from Palm Springs in disgrace in 1997 when it was publicly disclosed that he had a prior history as a paedophile priest; and,
- in April, the Pope accepted the resignation of Auxiliary Bishop Franziskus Eisenbach of Mainz, Germany, who was accused of sexually abusing and injuring a woman during an exorcism.

Nor, was this abuse prevalent and systematically concealed only in “the West” or in English speaking countries, as is sometimes suggested:

- in France, Bishop Pierre Pican of Bayeux-Lisieux received a 3 month suspended gaol sentence in 2001 for covering up for a paedophile he had sent for psychiatric help and transferred to another parish; and
- Philippines Episcopal Conference president, Archbishop Orlando Quevedo revealed in July this year that more than 200 priests are under investigation for sexual abuse committed in that country during the last 20 years.

Just how prevalent is sexual abuse among Catholic clergy? Estimated from the Philippines example, about 3% of its 7,000 priests are offenders. Richard Sipe, a psychiatrist and former Benedictine monk, who has studied priestly sexuality for some 25 years, interviewing 1,500 priests and others, estimates that 6% of priests abuse (4% abusing teenagers, aged 13 to 17; and 2% abusing pre-pubertal children - “Sex, Priests and Power: Anatomy of a Crisis”, Brunner/Mazel, 1995). Most estimates are within the 2 to 7% range.

What is to be done to resolve and combat clergy sexual abuse? Attempts within the Church have made uncomfortable practical allies of conservatives and liberals who each propose full disclosure and zero tolerance as solutions,

although they have very different explanations of the cause of the problem, and proposals for its solution.

Conservatives argue that the shift away from traditional moral teachings and practice should be countered with a renewed emphasis on celibacy and the removal of those with homosexual tendencies from the seminaries. The evidence that the majority of abusers trained and ministered in just such a Church is overlooked.

Liberals suggest that ending the celibacy regime and allowing men and women priests to marry could solve the abuse problem. This does not address broader abuse issues other religious denominations experience.

Perhaps what is really needed is “common sense”? A USA Today/Gallup poll taken in March 2002 found that 74% of American Catholics believe that the Church is more concerned with protecting its own image than with solving the problem of clergy sexual abuse. They may just be right!

Maintenance of an image to protect hierarchical structures of privilege, power and control seems to be at the core of the Catholic Church’s stubborn refusal, locally and internationally, transparently to address an issue many secular authorities have had to deal with decades ago. The Australian Churches, grappling with their history of inaction, have probably spent as much on “spin doctoring” as on processes for dealing with abuse itself.

In addition to what the Australian Catholic Church has already done to address the problem, I believe there are three further steps that would address sexual abuse by clergy and its causes:

1. In the immediate term, the Church should press for or instigate an independent, comprehensive and open public enquiry into sexual abuse within the Church, along the lines of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It must decide or be told that the documented pattern of denial, rationalization, cover-up, and blaming victims is over;
2. In the medium term, the Church must change its understandings of gender equality, sexuality and celibacy, forged in the third century and still trapped there. Equality for women, tolerance of sexual diversity and the end of the virginity/holiness myth are obvious threats to the homeostasis from which the current crisis has emerged and, hence, strongly resisted;
3. Ultimately, the Church must come to terms with the Enlightenment its teachings spawned: it must “democratise” to allow full participation by its members in its structures of governance and accountability, and dispense once and for all with any concept of “divine rights” for clerical coteries, however exalted.