



Child Safeguarding
& Protection Service

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NEWSLETTER

‘Cross of the Moment’ looks at scandal of abuse in England and Wales from Catholic angle

THE CROSS OF THE MOMENT is the report of the ‘Boundary Breaking Project’ of the Centre for Catholic Studies in the University of Durham in the UK. The report is about clerical child abuse in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. We have had many reports about the abuse of children in the Catholic Church in the UK, Ireland and elsewhere, but this report is unique in several important respects.

The report is written from an explicitly Catholic perspective. It explores the impact of the scandal of clerical child abuse, firstly on those who experienced abuse and on their families. It then broadens the focus to consider the impact on the wider Catholic community, including the lay faithful, parish communities, clergy and religious. It then explores what the clerical child abuse crisis tells us about ourselves as Catholics and about the Church: its structure, culture and organisation and how these create conditions in which abuse becomes possible. It considers how we might draw on our faith to meet the challenges we now face in order to make reparation for the past and live our Christian lives in accordance with God’s plan for us.

The report is built on original research undertaken

by the team at the Centre for Catholic Studies. Those who participated in the research included:

- Twenty-two survivors of abuse
- Two family members
- Seventeen lay people
- Twenty-five priests and deacons, including three against whom allegations of abuse had been made
- Eighteen members of religious orders (priests, nuns and brothers)
- Fourteen safeguarding professionals (some, but not all, of whom were employed by Church bodies)
- Five diocesan bishops

The survivors and their family members told stories of pain, betrayal, broken lives and inter-generational trauma. As the report states, each story is unique. Every voice needs to be heard. Importantly, the impact of the abuse was felt in different ways and at different times and it was sometimes difficult for participants to identify which was the more significant: the devastation caused by the abuse itself or that caused by

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'Practical steps needed'

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the often repeated failures of Church authorities to respond to disclosures of abuse in accordance with the teachings of the gospels. The pain of this secondary victimisation was just as acute as that caused by the original abuse for the survivors and also for other Church members. This is something we understand here in Ireland. It is described in graphic detail in a submission made by a group of survivors to the recent Synod, a submission that was later sent (without amendment) to the Holy See, along with the report of the Church in Ireland.

Survivors reported an absence of compassion in how their complaints were dealt with by Church authorities. They experienced long delays in responding to their complaints, as well as disbelief and outright denial of what they disclosed. Lay people spoke of dismay and bewilderment following experiences such as a respected and well-loved priest disappearing from their parish without explanation and learning from the media subsequently of his arrest and subsequent conviction for child abuse. Bishops spoke of the challenge of having to deal with situations they inherited from their predecessors and the difficulty of balancing their responsibilities to survivors and accused priests.

The scandal of clerical child abuse recalls us to an awareness of our fallen state. The report considers the question of sin. It sees it not purely in terms of individual wrongdoing, but as something that can also be built into structures, as when structures of economic inequality deny many in the world the basics of a de-

cent existence. The report applies this understanding to Church structures. It considers, for example, Pope Francis's critique of clericalism in the Church: that process by which some in authority assume privilege rather than deliver service. This is underpinned by a culture of deference among those who lack authority and therefore do not question unacceptable behaviour. It is in just such circumstances that abuse can occur and be hidden, sometimes in plain sight.

The report considers the issue of accountability in some detail. Much of the public discussion about accountability focuses on identifying a person to blame when things go wrong and insisting that he or she pays the price for their fault in some way. In the case of public figures, paying the price often means resigning or being sacked from their position. The report, however, takes a different approach and links accountability with support. There is very little thought given in the Church to the support needs of those

who carry responsibility and authority, whether priests, leaders of religious orders or bishops. There are no formal line management or professional supervision structures, though some individuals may seek individual or group support. This leaves little space for reflection and self-analysis. Habits become established which are rarely questioned. Those who have little experience of accounting for themselves to their superiors or their peers are not going to find consulting with their parishioners, for example, comes naturally. The parishioners, for their part, will hesitate to ask for such accountability, partly out of ingrained habits of deference and partly



out of fear of giving offence. Yet, we know that transparency and accountability are key to developing a safer Church for children.

The report acknowledges that progress has been made and that better safeguarding structures have been put into place. People who make allegations or complaints are more likely to receive an appropriate pastoral response, but much remains to be done.

The report does not make recommendations, but it does explore what it describes as “the possibilities for redemption” and looks at initiatives that have been undertaken to promote healing. It considers restorative practices, highlighting, for example, the restorative work done by the Jesuits in Ireland in relation to those abused by Joseph Marmion.

In the concluding section the authors write of: “trusting that the Holy Spirit is active in the body of all the faithful and will open up for us the paths to take, if we are courageous, patient and prayerful as a body and willing to listen to and learn from all the voices through whom the Spirit speaks. But it comes with a caution: we have to turn our repentance, grief, hope and desires into practical steps, as Pope Francis insists”.

All those involved in this project have done the Church a considerable service.

The report can be accessed and downloaded free of charge online at www.durham.ac.uk/ccs-boundary-breaking/.

After 2024 review, updated procedure has been approved

THE CROSS OF THE MOMENT REPORT refers to “the perceived lack of clarity and transparency of the procedures for dealing with cases [of allegations of abuse]” and how this feeds into the vulnerability of priests and their fear of false allegations. The report states that false allegations are rare but that they do occur.

The Archdiocese of Dublin has such a procedure. It was originally written in 2012 following an extensive process of consultation that included civil and canon lawyers, the civil authorities and the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

The procedure prioritises the safety and protection of children and vulnerable adults over other considerations and describes how those who wish to make disclosures of abuse receive a prompt and pastoral response and are offered support services.

The procedure sets out how the rights of accused clerics are safeguarded, for example, by giving them access to civil law and canon law advice that is paid for by the Archdiocese. It also details the supports provided to clerics if and when they are asked to step aside from ministry. Such a decision is generally not taken until the cleric concerned has had an opportunity to hear the allegation that has been made against him and to respond to it.

The civil process takes precedence over the canonical or internal Church one. Civil processes are often very protracted which means it can be years before a case is concluded. This is clearly a very difficult situation for an accused priest. However, it is not one over which the Diocese has control.

The Dublin diocesan procedure was amended and improved in 2019, to take account of what had been learned from implementing it in the period after 2012. A further review was carried out in 2024 and amendments made to the procedure. The latest version has recently been signed off and will shortly be available on the CSPA website at www.csps.dublindiocese.ie under ‘Policy Documents’.

The Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors will be on Friday, March 7

THIS YEAR, the Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse falls on Friday, March 7. It is the first Friday in Lent. As in previous years, the diocesan Office of Mission & Ministry has prepared a resource for use by parishes on the day. This will be made available to all the parishes of the Archdiocese well before March 7.

The Cross of the Moment report, referred to above, speaks of the importance of taking opportunities offered by events such as this to demonstrate our concern for all of those who have experienced abuse. Apart from discussing the impact of clerical child abuse and its impact on, and implications for, the Church the report also highlights many positive initiatives that have been taken to reach out to victims and survivors and to offer them support, including spiritual support.

Here in Ireland, we have Towards Peace, one of the first spiritual support services to be established within the Catholic Church. It provides spiritual accompaniment to those who experience abuse in a Church context on the island of Ireland. This is to enable people to find their own spiritual path whether that is within the Church or outside it. Towards Peace is jointly funded by AMRI, which represents religious orders, and the IEC which represents dioceses. It is a free service for both victim/ survivors and for family members.

Towards Peace Spiritual Support Service



**Safe spaces to
connect with your
own spirituality, with
your sense of God,
and your journey
Towards Peace.**

**Towards Peace is a spiritual support service
for survivors of physical, emotional,
sexual and spiritual abuse.**

**Tel: +353 1 505 3028
or + 353 86 771 0533**

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**Find us on Facebook as:
Towards Peace Spiritual Support Service**

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