

Child Safety Sunday, 11th September 2016
(National Child Protection Week)
What is the Catholic Church's Response?

Spotlight

The movie *Spotlight*, which is the story of Child Sexual Abuse in the Boston Archdiocese, USA, has been screening in cinemas, flight entertainment and into our living rooms. According to Fr Richard Leonard SJ, Australia Film Critic, "This is one of the angriest films you will ever see. The movie sheds a terrible light on a terrible evil" (21 Jan 2016) and an "emotional tour de force" (Time Magazine, 4 Nov 2015).

Sexual abuses by many Catholic clergy & religious have received enormous coverage in the media since the 1970s. The Church is now constantly in the spotlight and there is nowhere to hide. More people in our community will be greatly distressed at the Church's management of sexual abuse of minors. Obviously, the long and messy road of the past is possibly the most immediate source of anxiety or anger amongst millions of good Catholics and fellow Christians today. No words can describe the inner anguish of victims in their desperate cry for justice, truth and healing. Definitely, we live in a great age when all respect has to be earned.

As a Catholic priest, I acknowledge with deep sadness and regret that church personnel have abused children, adolescents and vulnerable adults who have been in their pastoral care. The priests, religious and many of you at OLSH parish do carry with you the Church's anxiety, anger, and frustration. In the words of St Paul, "When one member suffers, all members suffer with it," (1 Cor 12:37).

Obviously, we all have some difficulty talking about sexual abuse and the scale of it in the Church and other civil institutions. Hence many have asked me the big question, 'How has the Catholic Church attempted to justly respond to this serious pastoral challenge?'

This parish bulletin insert is a humble attempt to respond to the above question without exhausting everything the Church has done in the past. On this Child Protection Sunday, 11th September 2016, may we all play our part in creating stronger communities where we work together to ensure our children and vulnerable adults are kept safe.

"I am deeply sorry", Pope Benedict, 19th July 2008, Sydney

The Roman Catholic Church leaders, including the Popes, bishops and religious superiors around the world have attempted to respond as best as they could to ensure a safer future for all children. Bishops and religious superiors have issued protocols, policies, procedures and initiatives detailing abuse prevention efforts; renewed vows to immediately report abuse complaints to Police, and in June 2002 the USA Catholic Bishop's Conference highlighted the Church's zero-tolerance policy that mandates the removal of predators from the Church.

In December 2006 the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference through the *Church's National Committee for Professional Standards* issued a major national protocol called *Towards Healing* (Published Dec 1996, Sydney). It contains principles and procedures in responding to complaints of abuse against personnel of the Catholic Church. It is a living document and constantly open to review as system's and environment evolve in trying to meet the needs of those involved.

Mr. Francis Sullivan, who heads the Truth, Justice, Healing Council of the Catholic Church in Australia writes, "As far as the Catholic Church in Australia is concerned, we have been cooperating as best we possibly can, at many, many levels, with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Nothing we have that the Commission has asked for has been withheld and no one the Commission has wanted to speak to has not been available. We are the single largest institution the Commission has dealt with. We have been the subject of more public hearings into different parts of the Church than any other organisation or institution and well over a third of the private sessions so far have related to the Catholic Church" (23 Feb 2016, <http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au>).

Today formators at seminaries are expected to offer professional diagnostic testing for every seminarian studying to become priests. All seven Archdioceses and twenty-one Dioceses in Australia have Codes of Conduct spelling out what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. Workshops and in-service seminars on safe environment training continue to be conducted by Catholic Bishops for all their priests, religious, and now reaching out to church employees and volunteers to promote the safety and well-being of all children and vulnerable adults.

Bishops are meeting victims and offering them all available options for healing and some form of reparation as demanded by justice and compassion. In the USA, the Catholic Church is constantly offering Safe Environment training in the 194 dioceses/eparchies of the country. Over two million adults have been trained to recognize the behaviour of offenders and what to do about it. It is also reported that over 5 million children are being equipped with the skills to help them protect themselves from abuse. At the local level, our good Bishop Eugene is constantly reminding clergy and religious of the Diocese of Darwin on matters pertaining to boundary violations, self-care and the need to build life-giving relationships amongst all peoples.

Another media release from the Truth, Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) reported that "abuse survivors in Ballarat have welcomed Ballarat Bishop Paul Bird's decision to make himself available as a defendant in historic child sex abuse civil claims. Bishop Bird, along with a number of other senior Church leaders including Archbishop Fisher in Sydney and Archbishop Coleridge in Brisbane, has now publically endorsed the new policy which requires a Church organisation facing a civil claim of child sexual abuse to help identify an entity to sue. What the change means is that if an abuse survivor wants to go to court then the first hurdle of finding someone to sue has now been removed" (23 Feb 16 TJHC).

Last year Pope Francis met victims of Catholic clergy sex abuse and vowed that those responsible will face justice. I know this might ring hollow for some survivors as they continue to suffer years of unattended inner anguish and public exposure. The Pontiff has vowed that clergy in sex abuse cases will face justice, "The crimes and sins of the sexual abuse of children must no longer be held in secret. I pledge the zealous vigilance of the church to protect children and the promise of accountability for all" (27th September 2015, USA). Since his election, Pope Francis has appeared to offer new hope to victims, with a call for action on sex abuse in the Church. Under his papacy, a Vatican committee has been set up to fight sexual abuse and help victims. Moreover, Vatican officials submitted publicly to questioning for the first time in January 2013, before a UN panel in Geneva. In April 2003, the Pontifical Academy for Life organized a three-day conference, entitled 'Abuse of Children and Young People by Catholic Priests and Religious', where eight non-Catholic psychiatric experts were invited to speak to near all Vatican representatives. The Holy See is also a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a legally binding instrument which commits it to protecting and nurturing the most vulnerable in society.

Examine the Dark Places of History

In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI offered a sincere apology to the pain and suffering endured and assured the victims and relatives and that he too shared in their suffering, "They have caused great pain and have damaged the Church's witness. Victims should receive compassion and care, and those responsible for these evils must be brought to justice" (St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, 1 July 2008), following in the footsteps of Saint John Paul II in the Great Jubilee Year 2000 who called for an examination of history and conscience. *The Church must of its own initiative examine the dark places of its history and judge it in the light of Gospel principles*, (St John Paul II, *When the Pope Asks Forgiveness*, 1998). Pope Benedict, for example, took immediate action against a Mexican-born priest namely Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado who founded the Legionaries of Christ, a Catholic religious order. Maciel was found guilty regarding his sexual abuse of seminarians and young people around the world. Pope Benedict XVI waited no time and ordered the priest to a life of penance. It has also been catalogued that Saint John Paul II has apologised for the sins of the Church nearly one hundred occasions from the Crusades, the slave trade, the conquest of Latin America, the Inquisition, Galileo, Shoah, women, Australia's stolen generation and many others including sexual abuse of minors. Following the revelation of the extent of the problem of clerical abuse, Pope John Paul II stated in an address to the American Cardinals on 23rd April 2002, "People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young".

Many good Catholics have had reservations about Popes and bishops saying sorry, convinced that it could be pastorally damaging to the church including the sexual abuse of minors. It is a very grey area in protecting the reputation of the Church versus justice, truth, and healing for victims. But what could be more destructive if the Popes had continued on with the life of the Church without a single apology over the many centuries of sin? What is ethically and spiritually wrong about kneeling before the Mercy of God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins? Like Simon Peter, the first Pope who humbly fell at the knees of Jesus saying, "Leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man." (Luke 5) and Isaiah 6:1-8, "What a wretched state I am in, I am lost." You and I bear the name of Christian whether we are responsible or not and therefore our own sin of neglect and omission has in many respects impeded the Holy Spirit's working in the hearts of many people. Let's not be afraid to keep the memory of 'where sin increased, grace abounded even more', Roman 5:20. The long journey Home in the parable of the lost son begins with an acknowledgement in a quagmire of despair, "I will get up and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you..." (Luke 15). Undoubtedly the Church has always recognized that humility is absolutely essential if we are to take that first step to caring for the victims and prevent abuse in the future. How pastorally appropriate in this Jubilee Year of Mercy for the Church to make an act of mercy by saying sorry to all victims of sexual abuse.

The road ahead is long.

A few bishops have resigned or have been forced to resign including Cardinal Law as Archbishop of Boston on 11 April 2002. His Archdiocese had to sell substantial real estate properties and close a number of churches in order to pay the \$120 million in claims against the archdiocese. He admitted that he had been reassigning paedophile priests to new parishes despite knowing how wrong this was (http://www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/stories/110402_cardinal.htm, 27th July 2002). In February 2002, some 18 religious orders in Ireland made a public apology and agreed to provide \$128 million in compensation to the victims of childhood abuse. In June 2015 Pope Francis also accepted the resignation of two other bishops namely, Archbishop John Nienstedt of Saint Paul, Minneapolis, and one of his deputies, auxiliary Bishop Lee Piche over their links with a perpetrator.

Personally, I don't expect the Catholic Church or any other Christian churches to be manifestly holy all the time. Life would be better if people never failed but to think that clerical or parental failures *must* not happen or *must* not be exposed is unwise. It would also be ideal if sexually immature men had never been ordained. How unreal – not to say unfair – it is to expect that any priest, bishop, Mr & Mrs. Jones across the street or pope *must* be perfect. This is one of the reasons why many of priests and Catholics, in general, have excessive anxiety built on the expectation that the reputation of the Church or my family must not be damaged because of the scandals. Given human fallibility, it is laudable hope that it will never happen again. No law or policy can eradicate sin from the fallen nature of the human situation, including that of the human beings who comprise the priesthood and religious life. I hope a proper balance of law, spirit of love & sincere contrition, however, can dispose injured individuals and communities to healing and forgiveness.

The Catholic Church and bishops, priests, religious and institutions will continue to dig deep, throw the net out wide and do all we can to make sure that it never happens again. The fact is the Church has worked hard to protect children. Of course, much has been done but more needs to be done. Until child sexual abuse is no longer a part of society, the Church will continue its efforts to eradicate it first and foremost from within. The priests and religious will continue to support and assist our bishops, and to work together with them in combating this evil in our midst.

So what is OLSH Parish doing?

As part of the Diocese of Darwin Protocols, I am officially appointing a team of three parishioners namely, Mr. Manfred Casseeram, Ms. Pane Komene, and Mr. George Tetteh as Safeguarding Officers for Children and Vulnerable Adults at OLSH Parish. Part of their task is to make sure that all church personnel and all volunteers working on behalf of OLSH Parish go through constant child safety checks and induction process, possession of an Orchre Card/Police Checks, risk assessment strategies and maintain a prevention compliance checklist.

In this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Church deeply recognizes her need for mercy and therefore we will continue to seek forgiveness, make amends and remain vigilant. This is a work in progress as the Church tries to get it right even though it might not turn out successfully in the future. Yet the gift of hope remains and sustains the Church that human sin does not exceed God's mercy but in God's redemptive activity brings good out of evil.

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References: a) *Towards Healing*, January 2010, Revised Edition;

b) *National Committee for Professional Standards Media Statements*;

c) *American Bishops Catholic Conference*;

d) *Australian Bishops Catholic Conference Statements*;

e) *Papal Documents, Popes Francis, Benedict and Paul 2 (Letter to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences and Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life concerning the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (2 February 2015))*