

The Dark Night of the Catholic Church

Examining the child sexual abuse scandal

Edited by

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Introduction

Brendan Geary and Joanne Marie Greer

*The story of the sexual abuse of the young within the Catholic Church has been the greatest drama of my thirty-six years of priesthood.*¹

Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Canberra
and Goulburn, Australia

When Church historians of the future reflect on the early years of the twentieth century, it is likely that the crisis related to the sexual abuse of children, and the scandals that accompanied it, will have a prominent position. It is not difficult to understand why this should be so. The sexual abuse of children has broken the universal taboo against sexual contact with children. The sense of shock and betrayal accompanying this tragedy is compounded by the fact that it has been perpetrated by men (and some women) who had dedicated their lives to pastoral care, education and service. The scandal has reached beyond individual pathologies of perpetrators to the way that the Church understands itself, how it relates to civil authorities, how it deals with moral lapses and criminal activities of the clergy, and how the bishops and the Vatican relate to each other.

This book has been written to provide an overview of a range of issues related to this topic. Hopefully it will provide useful information and advice for Church leaders, teachers, counsellors, safeguarding officers and parents. There is a wealth of information available on this topic, from professional research to popular writing, descriptions of particular episodes and autobiographies of

1. Archbishop M. Coleridge (2010). *Seeing the Faces, Hearing the Voices*, May, <<http://www.cg.catholic.org.au/about/default.cfm?loadref=359>>, retrieved 20.1.2011.

victims. There have been articles in professional journals, Church publications and the popular media. The flow of information continues. For example, at the time of writing there has been the release of a letter from the Vatican to the bishops of Ireland that appears to advise against reporting priests to secular authorities, and to ensure that any canonical procedure is properly prepared.² Within twenty-four hours of the release of this letter there were conflicting interpretations available, with victims seeing it as the ‘smoking gun’ demonstrating that the Vatican had directed hierarchies not to report abusive priests to the secular authorities.³

It is possible to discern various stages of this crisis. There were individual cases, which caused sensation and scandal, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. At this point the bishops and religious superiors handled many individual cases either by moving the perpetrator to another assignment or sending him for treatment to one of the Church’s own therapeutic facilities. Cases were handled discreetly, sometimes payments were made to victims, and lawyers appear to have significantly influenced, if not directed, the Church’s response. Secrecy agreements were common in financial settlements. Many bishops and religious leaders have since regretted the overly defensive, legalistic, confrontational and secretive nature of this approach. At its core it was far removed from the pastoral response that should have been the hallmark of the Church.

The Church had its established system for dealing with such cases and, despite knowledge of that system’s problems and growing revelation of scandals, efforts to adopt a different response were unsuccessful. For example, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson has written about the concern in the Vatican when he said publicly that the Church could do more for victims (see chapter 14). Ten years

2. J. Allen (2010). *Is Vatican Letter on Abuse a ‘Smoking Gun?’*, 19 January, <<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-letter-abuse-smoking-gun>>, retrieved 20.1.2011.

3. <http://www.cobourgatheist.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=990:vatican-letter-qsmoking-gunq&catid=133:international-news&Itemid=76>, retrieved 20.1.2011.

later there are statements from bishops, hierarchies and the pope apologising fulsomely for the abuse that has taken place. What changed? The Boston crisis of 2002, the reports that were published in Ireland in 2009 and 2010, and the revelations of abuse in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium (particularly the revelation of abuse by Bishop Vangheluwe) all led to a change in attitude and response of the bishops and the Vatican. Joseph Chinnici wrote that, 'New ethical horizons are not easily created in an organizational level by people shaped through custom and habit.'⁴ The Vatican and bishops prefer to handle things discreetly. It took the revelations by the media and pressure from victims and their advocates to lead to the change in the Church's ways of acting and protecting children.

This book is divided into four parts. The first concerns 'Understanding'. This part begins with a chapter that outlines some of what is known about the history of child sexual abuse in the Church. An awareness of the reality of abuse in the history of the Church, the varied (mostly failed) attempts to prevent abuse, or to punish and change the behaviour of offenders, enables us to become aware of our 'religious vitamin deficiencies'.⁵ In honestly researching, reading about and understanding our failures from the past, hopefully we should be better placed to prevent, as far as possible, such behaviour happening in the future. A chapter on the sexual use and abuse of children follows and complements the historical review. Advances in the care and protection of children are a recent phenomenon.

There are four chapters that provide information to help us to understand clergy offenders. In chapter 4 Brendan Geary examines the Church and the hierarchy as a system, and how this contributed to the organisational culture in which abuse occurred. In chapter

4. J. P. Chinnici (2010). *When Values Collide: The Catholic Church, Sexual Abuse, and the Challenges of Leadership*. New York: Orbis Books, p. 21.

5. P. Brown (2000). *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. California: University of California Press, p. 505, quoted in Chinnici, *When Values Collide*, p. 95.

7 he looks specifically at the way that clergy offenders used and incorporated religious (and educational) ideas into the abuse. He discusses various theories that help us to understand how this may have happened and the role that this distorted thinking had in the abuser's *modus operandi*. Joanne Marie Greer explores the various factors that may contribute to someone's becoming an abuser (chapter 6), and Gerard J. McGlone provides an overview of current research on clerical abusers (chapter 5).

Two chapters in the first part are concerned with victims of abuse. Joanne Marie Greer discusses the effects of abuse on victims and their psychosocial development, and Elaine M. Bain focuses specifically on the way that the religious faith of the victims is abused and damaged by this experience.

The second part of the book is entitled 'Listening'. In this part there are testimonies by a perpetrator (who has used an assumed name), two victims, male and female, and a bishop who was both a victim of abuse himself and the bishop responsible for responding to victims in his own diocese (Sydney). Gerard Byrne explores the issue of 'secondary victims', making use of testimonies by a range of people whose lives have been touched by child sexual abuse. This is the central part of the book, and reflects the belief of the editors that the core of our response should involve listening. Chinnici writes that we need to create an 'ethical space of reciprocity'.⁶ He describes an experience where, as provincial, he brought together victims, parents and concerned parishioners after the revelation of abuse in his province. In order for healing to happen, those affected need to meet and listen to each other. As Chinnici reflects, 'the struggle to stay in relationship involves a struggle to keep one's integrity'.⁷ There will not always be mutual agreement, but it is surely healthier to hold these experiences and perspectives in tension, openly,

6. Ibid., p. 87.

7. Ibid., p. 97.

than to hide them and pretend they do not exist. The editors are particularly grateful to the people who have contributed their personal experiences and reflections to this part of the book.

The third part is entitled 'Responding'. There are chapters on how to respond to an allegation once it is reported (chapter 19), and on the treatment of victims and offenders (chapters 15 and 16). There is a special chapter on the role of spirituality in the recovery of offenders (chapter 17). This is particularly important in the light of the information in chapter 7 on the ways in which some clergy offenders used their faith and religious role as part of the abuse. For many clergy offenders, the discovery of a renewed faith and deepened spiritual life is a significant part of their journey of recovery. Joanne Marie Greer has written a chapter on the lingering effects of childhood sexual abuse in adulthood (chapter 18). The last chapter in this part concerns the Church's internal procedures for dealing with sexual abuse by clergy. Kristian Paver, a practising canon lawyer, carefully and clearly presents current procedures in canon law and explains the changes in the Church's law that have been enacted in the light of recent scandals.

The final part on 'Education and Preventing' contains four chapters. In the first (chapter 21) Seán D. Sammon looks specifically at the issue of clerical celibacy. Some commentators have tried to blame abuse on mandatory clerical celibacy or the presence in priesthood and religious life of homosexual men. Sammon discusses these critiques and puts forward a vision of celibacy as a healthy way of living and serving the gospel, but one which requires a foundation in spirituality and psychosexual maturity. When chastity is lived in a healthy way children are cared for and less likely to be victims of abuse. Jocelyn M. Bryan, in chapter 22, shares her experiences of teaching about child sexual abuse in the context of a course on Sex and Gender in Christian Ministry. This course was taught in an ecumenical context as part of a degree programme. In her chapter she explains the rationale behind the course and shares insights that were

gained from her years of designing and teaching it. Dennis Tindall has written a chapter on safeguarding children in the local church, in which he shares the fruits of his experience as a diocesan safeguarding officer. In the final chapter W. L. Marshall provides advice and guidance to help churches to prevent child abuse through improved formation of candidates and implementation of sensible prevention strategies in seminaries and parishes.

The Church as a faith community

A number of chapters of this book focus on various aspects of faith and how this was implicated in or affected by the abuse. Other authors discuss this in their chapters without making it the main feature of their writing. In the early days of responding to this crisis writers and researchers focused on the behaviour of the offenders, and analysed it from the perspective of psychology and law. Over time there has been a greater awareness that there has also been a crisis of faith and credibility at the heart of the issue. This can be seen in the testimonies of victims and in the consequences for those involved and (see chapter 13) in the impact on ordinary members of the Church. Chapter 19 contains an example of the effects that work with victims can have on those who accompany them in various ways.

The behaviour of perpetrators, but especially the responses of bishops, who concealed documents, protected abusers, blamed victims, obfuscated, had memory lapses at seemingly convenient times, and used lawyers to intimidate victims, caused shock waves among ordinary Catholics and others. Chinnici writes:

As a social institution the Church claims moral authority: as a religious institution it claims truth and ‘holiness.’ Such has been its self-presentation in America since the early years of the immigrant Church, a public posture only strengthened during the era of the Cold War. As the Baltimore Catechism

phrased it, '*Holy*' was a central mark of the Church; it was a social body always teaching *holy* truths and making people holy. The public institutional carriers of that holiness were the priests and bishops who had received the sacraments of 'Holy Orders, and who administered the *holy* Sacraments.'⁸

What people saw was not holy, but sinful. In Ireland, it has been argued that the new Irish Free State saw itself as morally superior to the British state from which it seceded. Anything that was impure had to be hidden and disowned; the clergy were not allowed to have moral lapses, as a pure, morally superior nation was part of the self-identity of the new state. These self-presentations have been casualties of the crisis.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge provided an honest and insightful reflection on the child sexual abuse crisis in a sermon preached on the feast of Pentecost, 2010. He said towards the end of his sermon:

All can see that this is a time of crisis for the Catholic Church, even though the nature of the crisis would be understood differently by different people within the Church and outside. The word 'crisis' comes from the Greek word *krisis* which means judgement. The Church is under judgement. That judgement is in part human, as many point the accusing finger at the Catholic Church and especially at her leaders. But also and more importantly, the judgement is divine. The God who has called the Church 'out of darkness into his own wonderful light' (1 Peter 2:9) is acting now as he has done in the past, as the Bible attests: God stands in judgement upon us and calls us into an experience of lamentation that acknowledges sin and looks beyond the disaster that sin has caused to the new future God is preparing for the people he loves. Paradoxically, this lamentation does not preclude the joy of Easter. We normally think that lamentation and joy are mutually

8. Ibid., p. 157.

exclusive, but now they have to find a home together in the one heart, the heart of the Church, just as they dwell together in the heart of Jesus Christ.⁹

In his book *God of Surprises*, Gerard Hughes SJ contrasted the signs of a Church with a true spirit of repentance with a Church that showed marks of false repentance.¹⁰ They are worth reflecting on in the light of the child sexual abuse crisis and the words from the sermon quoted above:

<i>Marks of true repentance</i>	<i>Marks of false repentance</i>
A Church with a spirit of true repentance will be concerned primarily with its mission, not its maintenance. It will see all its securities as provisional, finding its one security in God.	A Church with a spirit of false repentance will be primarily concerned with its own maintenance, whether of its doctrinal or moral orthodoxy, or its prestige in society, the preservation of its own structures or of its material possessions.
A Church with a true spirit of repentance will encourage the critical and mystical elements as well as the institutional in its members.	A Church which has no true spirit of repentance will emphasise the institutional element and give little or no encouragement to the critical or mystical.

These comments are highly relevant when considering the choices made regarding child sexual abuse in the Church. As Archbishop

9. Coleridge, *Seeing the Faces, Hearing the Voices*.

10. G. W. Hughes (1985). *God of Surprises*. London: DLT, p. 75.

Coleridge reminds us, as well as improving our approaches to safeguarding and the treatment of victims and perpetrators, the crisis is an invitation to repentance and a change of heart.

The title of this book, *The Dark Night of the Catholic Church*, echoes the title of the spiritual classic *The Dark Night of the Soul* of St John of the Cross. The revelations of sexual abuse of children have brought to light some dark chapters in the Catholic Church's history. Sexual abuse has involved suffering and a sense of being disconnected from God for many people. However, like the spiritual dark night, it will hopefully lead to a purging of attitudes, practices and behaviours that have interfered with the Church's mission or obscured the face of compassion it seeks to show to the world.

The range of chapters in this book reflects the complexity of this issue, but also the necessity of working together as clergy, professionals, victims, perpetrators, treatment providers and Church leaders to learn from the past and create a better and safer future. The editors would like to thank the authors who contributed to this volume and who have written in a spirit of generosity and hope. Like Archbishop Coleridge, we believe we need to hear the voices of lamentation, but also the message of hope. We hope that this volume contributes to both.

Reading

Chinnici, J. P. (2010). *When Values Collide: The Catholic Church, Sexual Abuse, and the Challenges of Leadership*. New York: Orbis Books.

Coleridge, M. (2010). *Seeing the Faces, Hearing the Voices*. May, <<http://www.cg.catholic.org.au/about/default.cfm?loadref=359>>, retrieved 7.3.2011.