

Reflections on Sexual Abuse

1. The Catholic Church is the target of a sustained and vicious attack by the international media. Why is the assault directed at the Catholic Church, and especially on the Pope? Is it likely that the secular media is really interested in the victims' welfare – if so, why pick on Catholic clergy? Child abuse is certainly not the monopoly of Catholic priests! Children are also abused by teachers, youth workers, relatives and even their own parents. Moreover, the phenomenon knows no religious boundaries; it also occurs in other Christian denominations and in non-Christian religions. I can be mistaken, but I am convinced that there are media gurus who are bent against anything Christian, and understandably the Catholic Church bears the brunt of their animosity, not least for its stand on Christian values and against the moral and spiritual decay of our society.
2. Irrespective of the media bias, the issue is most serious, and it must be dealt with squarely. The Catholic Church has admitted and asked forgiveness for the priests who have committed shameful deeds with young children and adolescents. Yet their individual guilt cannot be transferred to the entire clergy, much less to the collective Catholic community. Indeed it is prudent to remember that only a tiny percentage of priests have been accused of abuse; the vast majority have strived to fulfil their calling with honour and dedication to the Church and humanity, albeit they too have their sins, like the rest of us.
3. In dealing with cases of child abuse, church authorities have often sidestepped the civil courts, and in effect the Church has acted as an autonomous state within a state. That is wrong. Moreover there were efforts at cover-ups in an attempt to safeguard the name and image of the Church, but in the long term, as these cases came to light, the credibility of the Church was seriously damaged. The present crisis can be a turning point in the way the Church looks at and addresses the problem of sexual abuse. Indeed the Vatican has recently published its current policy to involve the civil authorities in every case, which was not always done in the past. Moreover, a serious study of the circumstances in which abuse is more likely to occur so that effective measures are taken to safeguard children in the future.
4. Is priestly celibacy the underlying cause of this problem? Frankly, I don't think it is. Paedophilia is not cured by marriage. Clerical celibacy is a separate issue, and it is high time for the Vatican to review its policy. Obligatory celibacy may be the occasion of frustration, loneliness and fornication for many priests who would otherwise choose to marry if they were allowed. Some Christian ministers are indeed called to celibacy, like the apostle Paul, but others are called to marriage, like the apostle Peter. We should remember that the New Testament clearly allows the marriage of bishops and presbyters, as indeed was the case in the early history of the church, and in other Christian denominations.
5. A word to victims of abuse. You may feel bitter anger in your heart against the priest who molested you; you may even be angry at the Church as a whole. Such bitterness may come to dominate your character and your entire life. You will find little help from psychologists and medicines. You will not rest if you see your offender locked behind bars. But you can be set free by Christ, for he too suffered at the hands of priests who condemned him unjustly to be nailed to a cross. Yet despite the pain and suffering, he cried to the Father to forgive them. God can give you a heart like that, and you will be able to pray to the Father, 'Forgive me my sins as I forgive him who sinned against me.'
6. A word to priests who erred. Do not be overwhelmed by the sense of guilt and failure. True, you have sinned against God. You have defiled the innocent. You have caused untold grief to the parents. You have brought shame and reproach to the church and the gospel. You wish you can change the past, but alas, you cannot. You may end up in prison. You may be rejected by the Church and society. But you are not beyond the grace and mercy of God. Turn to God; by faith grasp the cross of Jesus Christ and you will find forgiveness and peace in your heart.
7. A word to Catholics. You may feel embarrassed, angered or confused about your faith. That is understandable, especially since you looked up to priests as models of holiness and integrity. They err, sometimes gravely, just like you and me. That is why we cannot trust in man but in Christ Jesus alone. He will never ever disappoint you. "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."