

"Healing a Wound at the Heart of the Church and Society"

'The truth will set you free': Listening, Understanding and Acting to Heal and Empower Victims Marie Collins and Sheila Hollins

Sheila

Introduction

We have been asked to speak about the challenges faced by victims in their experience and recovery from clerical sexual abuse. I will introduce myself, and Mrs Collins will introduce herself shortly. Both of us want to thank you for making yourselves open to listening to the experiences of victims.

I speak as a psychiatrist with more than 35 years of clinical experience, initially as a child and family psychiatrist, and later as a psychotherapist and researcher with an interest in trauma and sexual abuse, and as a specialist psychiatrist working with people with intellectual disabilities and people with autism. I also speak as the mother of two adult disabled children. My family experience informs my insights into the challenges faced by victims and their families, including coping with serious trauma and assault. In 2011 Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor invited me to assist him in the Vatican Visitation to the Diocese of Armagh in Ireland. I participated in all of the meetings, private and public conducted during the Visitation over a two and a half week period in 2011. It was primarily a listening exercise to hear about clerical sexual abuse from victims and their families, from parishioners, priests, religious and others.

My contribution to our shared presentation draws heavily on both my **personal and professional** experience.

What we will try to show you in the next few minutes is how not being believed or even worse, being blamed for the abuse, adds hugely to the emotional and mental suffering caused by sexual abuse, and how the failure of an abuser to admit his guilt, or of his superiors to take appropriate action, further compounds the damage. The extra dimension of the abuse of spiritual power will also be explored.

Lets begin by defining what we mean by abuse. We are talking about any violation of intimate boundaries, including inappropriate sexually motivated touch, through to rape. The phrase 'sexual assault' may express the awful reality better than simply speaking of abuse. Do not doubt the seriousness of breaking these boundaries. Any intrusion into a private bodily space can be as traumatic as a physical wound. It cannot be excused simply as over-familiarity.

So what makes someone vulnerable to abuse?

There are some things that are specific to the child and others to their parent or caregiver. Ignorance about their bodies and in particular about their genitalia is certainly thought to be one risk factor. A woman who had been abused as a small child told how she had no language for that part of her body until she reached adulthood. She thought it would have been easier for her to tell her mother if she had known some anatomical language.

Exhortations to avoid strangers, but with no explanation about what the stranger might do are generally unhelpful, not least because stranger abuse and rape are rare. Someone already in the family or friendship circle commits the majority of abuse. This is usually an adult: someone bigger, stronger or in a position of authority such as a parent, sibling, and more rarely a teacher or priest. In the case of a priest there is an extra layer of trust and deference, which makes a disclosure of abuse even harder.

Learning how to keep safe includes learning to value the preciousness of one's own body and the awareness of it as personal and private. Children are taught how to keep themselves physically safe- take care, you might fall and hurt yourself; look both ways before you cross the road or a car might hit you and so on. Learning to keep sexually safe requires a similar openness and accuracy about the risks – tell Mummy if anyone tries to look at or touch your private parts, even if they say it's a secret. Naming the risk prepares the child best.

In my work with children and adults with intellectual disabilities, I have seen how difficult it is to prepare them with the knowledge and skills they need to keep themselves safe from a sexual predator. Such ignorance is not confined to people of limited cognitive ability nor just to some cultures.

Ignorance on the part of their parents and caregivers about the risks some adults pose - whether friends or strangers- is also a significant contributor. And many parents and teachers do not recognise the symptoms and signs of abuse. For example, they may tell a child off for masturbating but not ask if anybody has touched or hurt their genitals.

Some parents are particularly naïve, such as a single mother with learning or social difficulties, perhaps with no extended family support, who whilst struggling to cope, may be befriended by a paedophile who sees her children as an easy target. For some children negligence or neglect on the part of a parent is also a factor. Most parents will have a very high threshold of suspicion when it comes to a respected authority figure such as a priest, and the spiritual power invested in a priest leads them to have absolute trust -or has led to such trust in the past before any awareness of the possibility of clerical sexual abuse was raised.

Now I am going to invite Marie to share part of her story with you.

Marie

I was a victim of clerical child sex abuse. I had just turned thirteen and was at my most vulnerable, a sick child in hospital, when a priest sexually abused me. Although it happened more than fifty years ago it is impossible to forget and I can never escape its' effects.

As was common in children of those days I had no knowledge of sexual matters, this innocence added to my vulnerability. I took my Catholic religion very seriously and had just made my confirmation. I was sick, anxious and away from home and family for the first time. I felt more secure when the Catholic chaplain of the hospital befriended me, visited me and read to me in the evenings. Unfortunately these evening visits to my room were to change my life.

This Chaplain was only a couple of years out of the seminary but he was already a skilled child molester, I could not know this. I had learned that a priest was God's representative on earth and so he automatically had my trust and respect. When he began to sexually interfere with me, pretending at first, he was being playful; I was shocked and resisted, telling him to stop. He did not stop. While assaulting me he would respond to my resistance by telling me "*he was a priest*" "*he could do no wrong*" He took photographs of the most private part of my body and told me I was "*stupid*" if I thought it was wrong. He had power over me. I felt sick, I felt everything he was doing was wrong, but I could not stop it; I did not call out, I did not tell anyone. I did not know how to tell anyone. I just prayed he would not do it againbut he did.

The fact that my abuser was a priest added to the great confusion in my mind.

"Those fingers that would abuse my body the night before were the next morning holding and offering me the sacred host." ~~The fingers that the night before had entered my body were the next morning holding and offering me the sacred host.~~ The hands that held the camera to photograph my exposed body, in the light of day were holding a prayer book when he came to hear my confession. My abusers' assertion that he was a priest and could do no wrong rang true with me, I had been taught that priests were above the normal man. This added weight to my feelings of guilt and the conviction that what had happened was my fault; not his. When I left the hospital I was not the same child who had entered. I was no longer a confident, carefree and happy child. Now I was convinced I was a bad person and I needed to hide that from everyone.

I did not turn against my religion, I turned against myself.

The words this priest had used, to transfer his guilt to me, robbed me of any feeling of self-worth. I withdrew into myself, turned away from my family and my friends, and avoided contact with others. My teenage years were spent alone, keeping everyone at a distance in case they would find out what a bad, dirty person I was. This constant feeling of guilt and worthlessness led to deep depression and problems with anxiety which became serious enough to need medical treatment by the time I was seventeen. Long hospitalisations with depression followed and this left me unable to follow a career.

At twenty nine I met a wonderful man, married and had a son. But I still could not cope with life, the depression, severe anxiety and feelings of worthlessness continued. I developed agoraphobia which meant I was could not leave my house without suffering severe panic attacks. I was unable to give my son all the attention a mother should and could not fully enjoy his childhood. I felt I was a failure as a wife and mother. I felt that my husband and son would be much happier if I left them or died.

Sheila

Marie had kept her painful secret to herself.

Why don't victims speak out to end their ordeal?

Victims of abuse often feel dirty and ashamed, thinking that it is their own fault, and indeed their abuser may tell them that this is so, as Marie experienced. They may have been told that something bad will happen to them if they tell anyone what has happened to them, or that the abuser would get into trouble. This is a particular problem if the abuser is a father or brother, when the child wants the abuse to stop but doesn't want to break up the family. On the other hand the abuser may tell them that theirs' is a special and loving relationship and that it is their shared secret, and telling someone else will spoil it, or even that their sister or mother or another classmate or altar server will be jealous. Many victims say that they could not tell their parents about their abuse by a priest because he was such a respected person and could do no wrong in their parent's eyes. **The fear of being disbelieved, or of being punished for telling 'disgusting' lies is more likely to mean that a child will keep their awful secret than be able to disclose it to a trusted adult.**

Some young women are confused by their reactions to sexual intimacy with a **man**. One teenage girl, flattered by a **man's** attention, allowed him to have sex with her over many months, but he blamed her for what had happened. **Imagine if the man was also her priest and confessor, and used** his spiritual authority to make sure his sexual crime remained secret.

Victims rightly fear that they will not be believed. Sometimes after not being believed, a child may make unfounded and more elaborate allegations; allegations which can be disproved, thus apparently showing them up as a liar or unreliable witness. A sad outcome when the child had had a real grievance that was not heard.

Peter was repeatedly abused physically, emotionally and sexually as a small child with a mental disability, and then admitted to residential care because of behavioural problems. Later as an adult, Peter often accused staff and other residents of abuse but was never believed. Only when taken seriously in psychotherapy did his flashbacks to his childhood abuse begin to subside and his allegations of current abuse cease. Being believed was the first step on the path to his recovery.

So how do children and vulnerable adults react emotionally and behaviourally to abuse? Typically girls become more withdrawn and boys become more aggressive. Both genders are likely to show age inappropriate sexualised behaviour and this should be a warning sign to be vigilant for the possibility of abuse. We now know that adults who were abused as children experience more mental illness, including depression, anxiety and personality disorders. When they have not been believed they may simply come across as unreliable and disturbed.

In the listening that you have done in preparation for this week, you will have met people whose credibility you questioned. You may think that you are a good judge of character and reliability in a witness, but it is easy to get it wrong when someone has been abused in the past. Your own emotional capacity to hear what has really happened to them may be a barrier which makes it too difficult for the victim to disclose their experience of abuse to you. If you have been bullied or traumatised yourself, this may also be a barrier to hearing someone else's account of assault.

A minority of children will have such difficulty regaining a sense of their own identity that they will abuse their own positions of power over smaller or more vulnerable children in an attempt to take control of their own experience of trauma. Moving from the position and experience of powerlessness and terror, they become powerful and in control- the same mechanism which has become well understood as a psychological response to bullying.

I will give two examples of boys who tried to transform their own experience of being a victim into something which gave them a feeling of being in control. It is possible to imagine something similar happening to a boy abused by a priest when he was an alter server, in time abusing other boys when he has become a priest.

Billy was abused as a child, and began to abuse smaller boys when he was a teenager. He could not begin to feel empathy for his own victims until therapy addressed his own emotional experience as a powerless victim. How could he empathise with someone else when no one had ever believed him or empathised with his own terror as a victim? Or Brendan whose father had died when he was 6, and was then abused by his mothers' boyfriend, a man who regularly babysat for him from the age of 7 to 8. Sadly Brendan was one of the minority of abused children who went on to abuse others. He had 'forgotten' his own abuse until he was arrested on pornography charges and later for grooming a teenage girl on the Internet and meeting her for sex. His mother remembered that her former boyfriend had been convicted of abusing other children, but she had not made a connection to the risk she had put her own son under.

What are the long-term effects of abuse?

Many of the people I met in Ireland with +Cormac, had been carrying the effects of CSA for many years. **I have heard that some** had tried to tell their parents at the time the abuse was happening, but **that** their parents had refused to accept the allegation. In meeting the Visitors they were seeking to be heard, **perhaps it is said** for only the first time since it had happened.

When an abused person approaches, whoever the alleged perpetrator, I can almost see the metaphorical cotton wool they are wrapped in. Whether single or married, lay or religious, almost all have a profound vulnerability about them. **With respect to CSA, I think that** many keep their secret until media coverage **leads** them to be so preoccupied with their own story, that they break down and eventually find the courage to speak out. **Such people are** angry, angry that few people really believe them even now, angry about their lost innocence, angry about the effect on their daily life such as nightmares, an inability to enjoy a sexual relationship, a reluctance to have children themselves - for fear that they might become an abuser or their children might be abused. **Victims find** it hard to trust other people, and this has a devastating impact on their ability to form friendships and intimate relationships, and also impacts on their working relationships. It influences their career choices. It leads many to turn their backs on the Church and to lose their faith.

Abuse has affected many priests too. Many priests have spoken **publicly** about how their own experience of being the victim of a sexual predator, contributed both to their inability to understand their sexuality and their decision to be celibate as a priest. A priest in therapy with me spoke about his abuse as a junior seminarian in Ireland, and his belief

that he had deserved it because his mother had died in childbirth. He was ignorant about sexual matters and had no contact with girls in his teenage years. He found his first parish as a curate extremely difficult and years later felt angry that he had taken a vow of celibacy without having any understanding of human sexuality. He decided to remain a priest but later had a breakdown when his own superior left to get married.

Marie will tell us about the effect mismanagement by Church authorities has had on her faith

Marie

I was forty seven before I spoke of my abuse for the first time; this was to a doctor who was treating me. He advised me to warn the Church about this priest. I arranged a meeting with a curate in my parish. I was very nervous. It would be only the second time I had spoken to anyone about what had happened to me. This priest refused to take the name of my abuser and said he saw no need to report the chaplain. He told me what had happened was probably my fault. This response shattered me.

I had only begun to accept, through my doctor's help, that I had done nothing to cause my abuse. Now being told by my priest, that it was "*probably my fault*" caused all my old feelings of guilt and shame to re surface. I could not face talking of it again so stopped seeing my doctor. This curate's response served to keep me silent for a further ten years, more years of hospital stays, medication and hopelessness. He later told the police that he did not take my abuser's name because that was what he had been taught in the seminary¹

Ten years on there was extensive coverage in our press of serial sexual abuse by a Catholic priest. For the first time I began to understand that the man who had abused me might have done it to others. Thinking it was something about me that caused it to happen I had never considered that my abuser might have harmed others. Now I understood more I knew I must try again to let people know what had happened, so that children might be protected. This time I decided to go to the top with the certainty of mind that, once his superiors knew that this priest was a possible danger to children, their safety would come first and every step would be taken to ensure that no more would be harmed.

I wrote to my Archbishop and then gave details of my abuse to his chancellor, a monsignor and canon lawyer. This began the two most difficult years of my life. The priest who had sexually assaulted me was protected by his superiors from prosecution. He was left for months in his parish ministry which included mentoring children preparing for confirmation – the safety of those children ignored by his superiors. All this went against the Irish Catholic Church's guidelines on child protection of the time - they were ignored. It has since come to light that these guidelines were thrown into doubt by opinion from the Vatican that they might not conform to canon law². My Archbishop told me he did not have to follow them, despite the people being told they were being followed to the letter.

I was treated as someone with an agenda against the Church, the police investigation was obstructed and the laity misled. I was distraught.

I could not believe leaders in my Church would think it morally right to leave children at risk.

The accused priest had admitted his guilt to the diocese but during a meeting with my Archbishop I learned that his priority was the protection of the 'good name' of my abuser. I asked him how he could leave a known abuser in a position of trust with children? Rather than answer the question he admonished me for referring to this priest as 'an abuser' insisting it was a long time ago so I could not call him that. The Archbishop considered my abuse "*historical*" so felt it would be unfair to tarnish the priest's "*good name*" now. I have heard this argument from others in leadership in the Catholic Church and always there is blindness to the current risk to children from these men. Why?

When I disclosed my abuse to the hospital authorities where it took place I received a very different response. They were concerned for my well-being, offering me counseling and care while they immediately reported to the police and co-operated with their investigation.

After a long struggle my abuser was brought to justice and jailed for his crimes against me. My case is an example of how so called "historical" reports must be treated just as seriously as current ones. My abuser was jailed again last year for repeated sexual assaults on another young girl. These assaults took place a quarter of a century after he abused me and while he was still a trusted priest in her parish. He threatened this victim that her Catholic family would be thrown out of the Church if she told anyone what he was doing to her.

These men can abuse for their whole lifetime leaving behind them a trail of destroyed lives.

The mishandling of my case by the Church leadership led to a total collapse of my trust and respect in them and in my Church which until then had survived intact despite the actions of my abuser. What they had done was contrary to everything I held dear. I had believed justice and the centrality of moral law were embodied in my Catholic Church.

The final death of any respect that might have survived in me towards my religious leaders came after my abuser's conviction. I learned that the diocese had discovered, just months after my abuse, that this priest was abusing children in the hospital but did nothing about it except move him to a new parish. This was on his file when I made my report but despite knowing this they had still protected him.

After the trial the Archbishop issued a press statement to reassure the laity saying the "diocese had co-operated with the civil authorities" in my case. When pressed on this obvious lie³ the diocesan representative admitted that they felt the statement was justified, as it did not say they had co-operated "fully". How could I believe in anything my Church leaders said in the future knowing they were capable of this type of mental gymnastics? or known in the Church as "mental reservation".

Sheila

As Marie has so eloquently explained, the trauma of abuse is made worse when there is a failure of trusted childcare and church institutions to implement sound child protection

procedures. It is insufficient to have guidelines in place unless these are openly and rigorously followed.

In Ireland **it is said that** very few victims have had any counselling or therapy. **It is believed that** very few had received an apology, and hardly any had received compensation. But **in my experience** the lack of an admission of guilt and of an apology **is usually** the biggest barrier to healing and recovery.

As a person of faith, I am a great believer in the power of forgiveness as a healing agent. But forgiveness is rarely achieved without confession and reparation. As a psychiatrist and psychotherapist I also believe in the efficacy of therapy. But I have found that as a therapist my work cannot properly begin until justice has been achieved and so I call my professional approach, advocacy psychotherapy. I am aware that counselling and psychotherapy are scarce resources in many countries.

For example, Mary, a young woman with Down's syndrome had become withdrawn and mute after being raped in her care centre. The man who raped her had himself experienced abuse as a child. Mary was refused further stays in the centre, and was also asked to stay away from her day centre which he also attended. Her abuser continued to use these services. Her parents thought this was unfair but Mary was scared to go out and did not complain. Before trying to engage Mary in therapy it was important to reinstate her own access to day-care services. I know of a similar case of an autistic boy being raped by a staff member in a Catholic boarding school and of his exclusion when his family raised concerns about him.

Justice is also needed for victims of clerical sexual abuse.

We will conclude by repeating the key points with which we began: that being believed is in itself healing, especially if it is associated with an admission of guilt or responsibility, and even more so if there is an attempt at reparation. But this type of justice is only the beginning. Recovery is a slow process and some people will never fully recover from such a profound abuse of power and trust when they were at their most vulnerable, especially when the abuser was a priest. Ongoing support and friendship and a willingness to listen time and again to the anger and fragility that remains will require considerable patience because healing for some people is a very distant hope..

Marie will make a final point about her own recovery and how the admission of his guilt by her abuser was key.

Marie

I lived a life for over thirty years where just getting from one day to another was a struggle. I felt these were wasted years, a wasted life. I had many treatments for my mental health problems, some of which were helpful but none solved my problems. The beginning of recovery for me was the day in court when my abuser took responsibility for his actions and admitted his guilt.

This admission had a profound effect on me. It led in time to my being able to forgive what he had done and no longer feel him as a presence in my life. I attended therapy for nearly two years and through this came to understand how this abuser had twisted my

view of myself. This had come at a crucial time in my development. My feelings of guilt and a very poor self-image led me to turn away from those nearest to me and isolate myself. My deep-seated anxiety led to depression. Gaining insight into all these areas helped me to believe things could change. I could be in control of my life rather than have my past control me. I was able to leave the wasted years behind. I have not been hospitalized with any mental health issue since that time.

My one regret is that I can rarely bring myself to practice my Catholic religion. My faith in God has not been touched. I can forgive my abuser for his actions, he has admitted his guilt. But how do I regain my respect for the leadership of my Church? Apologising for the actions of the abusive priests is not enough. There must be acknowledgement and accountability for the harm and destruction that has been done to the life of victims and their families by the often deliberate cover up and mishandling of cases by their superiors. Before I or other victims can find real peace and healing.

Trying to save the institution from scandal has caused the greatest of all scandals and has perpetuated the harm of the abuse and destroyed the faith of many victims.

I feel the best of my life began fifteen years ago when my abuser was brought to justice. During those years I have worked with my diocese and the wider Catholic Church in Ireland to improve their child protection policies. I have used those years to become involved in working for justice for survivors and spoken out for better understanding of child abuse and for the improved protection of children. My life is no longer a wasteland. I feel it has meaning and worth.

This is why I speak here today with Baroness Hollins.

I hope what we have said will be of value to you in understanding the victims of this awful crime. Thank you for being open to listen to our presentation today.

Sheila invites questions.....

References:

- 1 Para 13.12 Commission of Investigation - Dublin Archdiocese Report
- 2 Para 7.13/7.14 Commission of Investigation - Dublin Archdiocese Report
- 3 A number of years later (13th April 2002) the archbishop issued a statement apologising for the lack of co-operation with the police