

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson



# FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

**End Sexual Abuse in  
the Catholic Church ... for Good**

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## INTRODUCTION

**If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.**

(MARK 9:42)

And yet, despite these words, thousands of priests and religious brothers worldwide have sexually abused minors, causing massive and lifelong harm.

When they first entered the seminary or novitiate, most of them were idealists, filled with enthusiasm for the message of Jesus and a desire to make the world a better place. Instead they have ended up violating every precept of Jesus, every teaching of the Church they profess to love, and every criterion of the most basic human decency.

There is an ancient saying: *corruptio optimi pessima* or, ‘the corruption of the best is the worst’. If those who start out with the highest ideals fall, there is no limit to the depths they can fall to.

When so many people act this badly, we can no longer limit our blame to the individuals, but must also look for factors within the very culture of the Church that have contributed. And when so many authorities in the Church



have attempted to conceal the abuse, or treated victims of abuse as though they were an enemy of the Church, we must again look for systemic factors behind such behaviour, factors that are part of the very culture of the Church.

Recently, a group of experts in advertising and public relations was asked what steps it might suggest to present the religion of Islam in the best light. Among the ideas suggested were: encouraging the bulk of moderate Muslims to speak up and dissociate themselves from the terrorists and fundamentalists, using women wherever possible as spokespersons, and identifying the one or two central ethical values at the heart of Islam and showing how ordinary Muslims live these values in their lives.

They were then asked to do the same for the Catholic Church. They discussed this for some time, but eventually said that, as long as the massive weight of the sexual abuse scandal was tied around the neck of that Church, there was really nothing they could suggest. Any talk of a 'new evangelisation' would be a waste of time. Indeed, any attempt to get back to 'business as usual' while the abuse scandal remained would be positively counterproductive.

Millions of good Catholics have been deeply disillusioned, both by the revelations of widespread abuse, and even more by what they have perceived as the defensive, uncaring and unchristian response on the part of those who have authority in the Church and claim to speak in God's name. The effects on the Church have already been massive and the poison will continue to eat

away at the very foundations of the Church for as long as the issue remains.

On the other hand, if the Church really did confront the entire issue of sexual abuse with total honesty, ruthlessly uprooting anything and everything that may have contributed to either abuse or the poor response to abuse, this would in fact be the best possible evangelisation it could carry out, and would have far more effect than any more conventional form of evangelisation.

All the evidence available says that the number of offences in this field has fallen greatly, and some might be tempted to think that the problem has, therefore, gone away and no longer needs to be thought about. The sad fact, however, is that the major reason for the fall in the number of offences has been naked fear—fear of being arrested and sent to prison, fear of the walk of shame in handcuffs before the television cameras, fear of the total and permanent destruction of one's good name before all the people one has ever known.

It is obviously good that the number of offences has fallen, irrespective of the motive. And yet an improvement based largely on fear is surely not good enough as a total answer to the matter. Surely we need to look more deeply at any contributing factors within the Church, and eliminate them.

There are three major tasks to be performed in eradicating sexual abuse from the Church:

- identifying and removing all offenders
- reaching out to and assisting all victims/survivors

- identifying and overcoming the causes of both abuse and the poor response to abuse.

I have been involved in the first two fields for the last eighteen years and, in my position as a retired bishop not looked upon with favour by those in authority, I don't know that there is much more I can do. So I am here turning to the third element of identifying and overcoming the causes of both abuse and the poor response to abuse. We must have priorities in the work to be done, and for me the first priority will always be that of preventing abuse. Once abuse has occurred, anything we do will always be inadequate, so the only real solution is to prevent abuse happening in the first place.

I believe that it is in this field of preventing abuse that the greatest failure of the Church is to be found. The work of identifying and eradicating all the factors that may have contributed to abuse—and to the poor response—has not been done and, indeed, there has not even been a public call from the Pope for it to be done. There is a crying need that it should be done now and with a sense of great urgency. All levels of the Church must cease to simply 'manage' the problem and instead seek to confront it head-on, identifying and changing anything and everything that needs to be changed. Only then will the Church regain some measure of credibility.

Since the subject is vast, there are a number of further comments that I need to make to specify and limit the purpose and scope of this book.

I speak of factors that ‘may have contributed’ to either abuse or the poor response to abuse. I freely admit that I do not have scientific proof that each of the factors I shall mention has contributed and I cannot have an exact knowledge of the extent to which each has contributed. If we were to demand such proofs, however, I believe we would merely be looking for an excuse to do nothing, and that cannot be good enough. If an element in the Church can be shown to be unhealthy, we should remove it anyway, especially if we can see a clear connection between that factor and the whole phenomenon of abuse.

There are some causal factors that are common to all offenders and others that are particular to each individual offender. In between these two, there are unhealthy factors within particular societies or organisations that can foster a culture in which abuse will more easily occur, or can compound the problem by contributing to a poor response. It is this culture within the Catholic Church that will be the particular focus of this book.

Needless to say, the Church must also look at broader factors in modern society that may have contributed to abuse. It might be argued, for example, that the more open portrayal of sex and the more liberal attitudes towards sex in modern Western society have led some priests to think that they too should benefit from these easier sexual attitudes. Any study of factors external to the Church, however, must never be to the exclusion of factors internal to the Church. Indeed, because the Church can change the latter in a way it

cannot change the former, it must give particular attention to the internal factors, and it is these factors internal to the Church that I shall look at in this book.

Abuse is most likely to occur when the three elements of unhealthy psychology, unhealthy ideas and unhealthy living environment come together.<sup>1</sup> Many studies have been done concerning unhealthy psychological elements and I do not have the competence to add anything to what the specialists have said on this topic.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, much remains to be done concerning unhealthy ideas and unhealthy living environments, and I hope that in these fields I may have more to offer.

I suggest that the major reason why the Church has not yet seriously looked at causes of abuse is that it fears that any serious and objective study of the causes of abuse would lead to a demand for change in a number of practices, attitudes, laws and even teachings within the Church, and it is quite unwilling to do this. In studying abuse, we must be free to follow the argument wherever it leads, and we must not impose in advance the limitation that our study cannot demand change in any teaching or

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<sup>1</sup> David Ranson, 'The Climate of Sexual Abuse', *The Furrow*, 53 (July/August 2002), pp. 387–397.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the point psychology has reached, and for nineteen pages of bibliography on the subject, see 'Child Abuse: A Review of the Literature', The John Jay College Research Team, Karen J Terry, principal investigator and Jennifer Tallon, primary researcher. See also 'The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States', a Research Study conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Both documents may be found on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at <http://www.usccb.org/ocyp/webstudy.shtml>

law. We must admit that there might be elements deep within the ‘Catholic culture’ that have contributed either to abuse or to the poor response to abuse.

Most of the cases of abuse that have come to light occurred a number of years ago and most of the offenders received their upbringing and training decades before that. The factors that led them to abuse may not exist in quite the same way or to the same extent today. Despite this, I shall study these factors, for it would be extremely dangerous to assume that any such factors had disappeared and no longer applied.

Priests and religious have many things in common, but they also have their differences. To be accurate concerning both groups in every statement I make would not be possible, and I feel that I would run the serious danger of making false statements about religious. Because of my personal experience, I shall here limit myself to speaking about priests, allowing religious to adapt my thoughts to their own situations.

This book is a continuation of the book that I published in 2007: *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church, Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*. I have repeated a certain amount of material from that book, but this book goes well beyond that one in the specific field of identifying causes of abuse.

I have been supported by many people in the writing of this book. I express special thanks to Sr. Evelyn Woodward RSJ and to Tony and Gerardine Robinson for their helpful

and constructive comments. I thank Fr. Michael Whelan SM and all the members of Catalyst for Renewal for their encouragement. I thank Gary Eastman, Tony Biviano and all the staff at Garratt Publishing for their assistance over many years and their enthusiasm for this book. I thank all those many people who have been calling out for a more radical response to sexual abuse.

Above all, I thank all the victims of abuse who had the courage to come forward and tell their stories. If serious change ever occurs within the Church, the credit must go overwhelmingly to them.





# **PART ONE**



## **Factors Contributing to Abuse**

## CHAPTER ONE

# MOVING FROM A RELIGION OF FEAR TO A RELIGION OF LOVE

In any religion, everything without exception depends on the kind of god that is being worshipped. It is the single most important fact about any religious system, for every aspect of the system will flow from it.

Ideas concerning this god will inevitably contain many elements that arise only from human minds; for, while there is only one God, there are an endless variety of human misunderstandings of God. Unable to grasp the infinite God, human beings constantly create a lesser god in their minds and worship that god, a god who is usually a very large human being rather than the true God.

In particular, all people have both profound fears and profound longings within them, with the fears leading to ideas of an angry god, and the longings to ideas of a loving god, and then with these two forces in conflict within them.

We can perhaps see this more clearly by looking at some developments in moral thinking in the Bible, reflecting developing ideas of God.

## **SIX LEVELS OF MORALITY**

In the moral journey of the people of Israel in the First Testament, we may distinguish a number of levels of moral thinking through which they gradually rose as their understanding of God changed and developed. I suggest six levels.

### **Level Six**

In Genesis 4:23 a man named Lamech demanded seventy-seven fold vengeance for any wrong done to him. This is surely the most primitive level of relationships between people, the very starting point of a long journey, and it reflects a very primitive idea of God. If a whole society were to adopt this criterion of seventy-sevenfold vengeance for any wrong done, it would be condemned to an endless cycle of violence and chaos, and any technical progress it made would be repeatedly destroyed by the violence. It may be called the level of superiority and vengeance, for Lamech sought vengeance because he considered himself superior to all other people. No one is immune from falling back to this level at any moment. Indeed, whenever a serious wrong is done to us, it is often our first spontaneous reaction: 'If you hit me, I'll hit you twice as hard.'

### **Level Five**

The people of Israel began to rise above the level of Lamech, but progress was slow, and the next level was no more than that of the well-known biblical saying: 'An eye for an eye,

a tooth for a tooth.<sup>3</sup> It was progress, for its force was: not seventy-seven teeth for one tooth—not even two teeth for one tooth—no more than one tooth for one tooth. It came from a time long before police forces and prisons, and so from a time when justice tended to be primitive, direct and physical. Far from requiring vengeance, it actually sought to restrict it. It may be called the level of justice without mercy.

In practice, however, it was still too close to the level of Lamech, and Mahatma Gandhi's comment on it was: 'An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.' It is the morality of 'getting even' ('He hit me first'). One is reminded of the chilling phrase attributed to Joseph Kennedy: 'Don't get mad; get even.' If humanity were to make serious progress, this rule would also have to give way to higher levels of morality.

### **Level Four**

Throughout human history, people have related to other people on one of two bases: either the usefulness of others to themselves, or the essential dignity of others. Sadly, in all cultures and at all times (including our own) the first has tended to dominate, with people esteeming those who were useful to themselves while pushing to the margins of society those who were seen as 'not useful'. This is the moral level of self-interest based on the usefulness of others to oneself. Needless to say, most of our relationships are reciprocal, that is, we both give and receive, and this is a good thing. But it leaves the question of how we should

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<sup>3</sup> Ex. 21:25, Deut. 19:21.

relate to both individuals and whole categories of people (e.g. the elderly, the Aboriginal people, homosexuals) who may in the eyes of some seem to have little to offer us. This level is reflected in many incidents in the Bible.

Self-interest will always be a powerful force in human relationships, but it is not an adequate basis for living in community. A community will inevitably disintegrate if it is based solely on self-interest and there is no mutual respect and concern.

### **Level Three**

The third level is that of the Ten Commandments,<sup>4</sup> the level that best reflects the practical influence of the great Covenant between God and the people of Israel. This was the gigantic step upwards of the First Testament—reflecting a very different understanding of God—for the Ten Commandments were a serious attempt to base human relationships, not on the usefulness of others to ourselves, but on their essential dignity and on the rights that flow from this dignity. It may be called the level of respect for dignity and the rights that flow from dignity. Five consecutive commandments call for respect for one's neighbour's dignity as a human being. In the first four they do this by demanding respect for:

- life and physical integrity (you shall not kill)
- the relationships that make life worth living and give

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<sup>4</sup> Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:6–21.

it meaning (you shall not commit adultery)

- material goods (you shall not steal)
- a good name in the community (you shall not bear false witness).

Within the Catholic Church, a whole world of teaching on all aspects of sex is usually given under the commandment concerning adultery. I believe that this is a restrictive understanding and I suggest that this commandment should rather be seen in terms of respect for the relationships that give life meaning.

There would be little quarrel about the importance of life, possessions or a good name; but the Ten Commandments insist that we add relationships to the list, for much of our life depends on them. Furthermore, just as 'you shall not kill' includes 'you shall not wound or harm physically in any way,' so not harming the relationship of marriage through adultery includes not harming any relationships that are important to people in making meaning in their lives e.g. relationships with parents or children or siblings or friends.

I suggest that these four commandments are meant to be taken together, for when taken as one whole, they are a powerful affirmation of one's neighbour's dignity. If one respects any three of the four, but violates the fourth (e.g. relationships), this is not a 75% success, but a basic failure to respect one's neighbour.

In the fifth of the series, the commandments forbid even desiring to harm one's neighbour ('You shall not

covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour').

There is a powerful new understanding of God in the idea of an essential dignity in every human being that demands respect and that gives rise to binding rights.

As well as being a great step forward, the Ten Commandments are also the essential basis on which any higher level must be built, for it is impossible to truly love another person unless one first has a genuine respect for the dignity of that person and the rights that flow from this dignity.

## **Level Two**

The third level was based on negative commandments: 'You shall not'; that is: 'Because you respect your neighbour's dignity, do no harm.' The second highest level requires that we not merely do no harm, but also do positive good to our neighbour. If I respect you as my equal, I will at least do you no harm and I will wish to see you given all that belongs to you by right. If I add love to respect, I will wish for all that is good for you and that is within my power to give you, even when you have no strict right to it. In other words, if I respect you, I will ask: 'Do you have a right to this?' If I love you, I will ask only: 'Do you need it and do I have it to give?' It is the level of love built on respect and reflects the god of the Golden



Rule: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself',<sup>5</sup> or 'in all things treat others as you would like them to treat you.'<sup>6</sup>

The beatitudes of Jesus start here but then continue into the highest level of morality.

### **Level One**

The highest level is also based on love, but this time on God's love for us. It is the level of the actions of Jesus: 'I give you a new commandment: love one another ... as I have loved you.'<sup>7</sup> It includes the idea of loving even our enemies.<sup>8</sup> For Christians, it reflects the God who gave totally-of-self in Jesus. Some might think that this level is a mere ideal that human beings could never live up to and that they can ignore in practice. Just occasionally, however, a story appears on our television screens e.g. of a stranger running into a burning house to rescue children. To do this involves far more than loving as one loves oneself; it is a genuine rising up to love as God loves. None of us will ever know whether we are capable of this level of heroism until we are faced with the test, and then we might surprise ourselves. Surely an overwhelming majority of parents rise to this level at many critical moments in their child's life, for there are many moments when they must love their child, not as they love themselves, but more than they love themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> Lev. 19:18.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 7:12.

<sup>7</sup> John 13:34.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 5:43.

There is no one who cannot fall back to the sixth or lowest level at any moment, but there is also no one who is not capable of rising to the highest level. Whenever we fall back to one of the lower levels, we fall back to the understanding of God that goes with that level. Whenever we rise to one of the higher levels, we rise to the understanding of God that goes with that level.

Frequent examples of all six of these levels of morality are found in the Bible. There were, of course, steps backwards as well as forwards, but in these six levels of morality there is the story of the communal journey of the people of Israel, and it can become the story of the personal journey of each of us.

Because it is a journey, Jesus himself did not disdain less-than-perfect levels and on occasions appealed to self-interest.

When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.<sup>9</sup>

In reading the Bible, it is a mistake to read the words as though they were in every case God's direct words to us

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 14:8–10.

today. The Bible is the story of a journey, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Lamech may be taken as representing the beginning of that journey, and Jesus Christ is its end, with everything else representing some stage in-between. To appreciate any particular statement, we need to assess where it belongs in the journey of the people of Israel. And we need to assess the kind of God that is being reflected by and worshipped in that statement at that particular point in the long journey. There is a vast difference in the understanding of God between, for example, the words of the prophet Micah: 'Act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God',<sup>10</sup> and the story of God allegedly slaying 70 000 innocent people because King David had carried out a census of the people.<sup>11</sup>

## **RIISING TO HIGHER LEVELS**

Even though Jesus was the end of that journey, and we live in the time after Jesus, the journey still continues for us as we seek to purify our personal ideas of God. Human ideas of God will always be infinitely inadequate, though some ideas can at least assist growth, while others will hinder it.

To promote growth, we must move:

- from a god about whom we use many words to a stunned awareness of an 'otherness' beyond the reach of either imagination or language
- from a god who is contained within a book or the

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<sup>10</sup> Mic. 6:8.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Sam. 24:15.

teachings of a human authority to a god who cannot be contained by any created thing

- from a god religious authorities can possess, package and dispense to others to a god of infinite surprise
- from limited human ideas (e.g. an elderly white male ruler) to a god who is above all limitations
- from an attitude that we will believe only in a god who agrees with us on all major matters to an attitude of profound humility before our own ignorance
- from a god greatly concerned with glory and majesty to a god not standing on dignity and not threatened by anything human beings can do, but caring passionately about what we do to each other, to ourselves and to the community
- from a god whose glory is to be found in our obedience to a god whose glory is to be found in our growth
- from an angry god, not to a god of soft love, but to a god who, out of love, wants our growth and, like a good parent or teacher, is not afraid to challenge us to grow
- from a religion in which beliefs, moral rules, worship and membership of an institution or human community holds first place to a religion in which a love-relationship with God holds first place
- from a commercial relationship with a god whose rewards can be earned by doing right things to a love-relationship with a god who is pure gift

- from a relationship in which we are firmly in charge and determine exactly what part God shall be allowed in our lives to a love-relationship of total giving
- from a god who demands that we bridge the gap between us to a god who always takes the first step and comes to us.

The Catholic Church is so vast and its history so varied that all of the ideas just mentioned, both good and bad, have had their place. There are many beautiful statements about a loving god and many examples of individuals whose lives reflected such a god in ways that had a deep impact on those who met them.

Sadly, there has also been a long history of the angry god, with the Inquisition being merely the most glaring example. Coercion of many kinds, including torture, has had its place in an institution that should have reflected the example of Jesus.

The very structure of the Church, with a monarchical Pope insisting on obedience and using coercive means to ensure conformity, means that the angry god is never far away. At every level of the Church, many Catholics experience this as the pervasive and dominant atmosphere.

This has created a Church in which, despite the talk of love, practice has been based too much on fear rather than love, and authorities have always had the support of the angry god for their words and actions.

Spirituality has too often been understood in the negative sense of self-denial, self-abasement and rejection

of the ‘world’, and the Christian life has too often been seen as consisting overwhelmingly in right behaviour before a judgemental god. A constricting guilt has played too large a part in the lives of too many people. These are unhealthy ideas that have too often created an unhealthy atmosphere and contributed to unhealthy actions.

To change all of this will require far more than a beautiful statement about God’s love. It will require a careful look at all aspects of the Church at every level, and the changing of everything that reflects the angry god—from finger wagging Popes, to priests who convince themselves that they listen to the people but always manage to get their own way in the parish, to the widespread lack of belief in and respect for conscience. This will be a massive task, but the rest of this book will make it clear that the angry god is to be found beneath most of the other factors I shall speak of. To change the culture while leaving the angry god in place is a contradiction in terms, for too much of the culture is built on the angry god. This is the first chapter, for I believe it is the single most important change that is needed if the scourge of sexual abuse is to be confronted and ended ... for good. Catholics of the future must live predominantly out of love rather than out of fear.

Believing in a primitive and angry god is unhealthy, and unhealthy actions such as sexual abuse can grow out of this unhealthy culture.