

Cultural change and renewal: challenges for religious life and the church

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If an inventory were to be drawn up of the damage and pain caused by child sexual abuse within religious institutions – the damage to individuals, the damage to institutions, the different categories of damage – it would be a very long list.

There is the damage to the victims themselves, many of whom have suffered a range of sometimes devastating and life-long impacts. Some have taken their own lives. While those of us working professionally in this area are aware of these impacts, the Royal Commission drew the attention of the entire community to them. The victims and survivors, and the healing and pastoral care offered by the churches, will be the focus of a later session of this conference.

Then there is the pain which has been caused to those who live and work inside the church, and the damage which has been caused to the church itself. I am aware that many individuals who work in religious and pastoral ministry, including priests, brothers, nuns, pastors, teachers, and social workers, feel betrayed by their colleagues who perpetrated the abuse, and their colleagues who failed to respond with integrity and justice. For some, there is the pain of having to continue to live in community alongside perpetrators who have been released from prison, or former leaders who failed in their duty. In these post-Royal Commission times, others will also question the dysfunctional and sometimes abusive church structures within which they have had to live and work.

There is the strain felt by all of those – and they are many – whose task it has been to try and clean up the mess that is left: those who have to deal, day in and day out, with victims, perpetrators, lawyers, police, parents, parishes, insurance companies, policies, and budgets.

There are the post-Royal Commission feelings of exhaustion and numbness experienced by many of us, including those survivors who may have felt re-traumatised by the material that came out of the Royal Commission. There is the pain of those whose stories were not told to the Royal Commission, who feel they could never tell anything so bad to anybody other than in a professional context.

There is the dawning recognition of the internal breach of trust within our church communities – the feelings of parents, students, the people left in the pews, the volunteers and the donors whose trust has been betrayed. What was going on while most of us were getting on with what we thought was a trustworthy institution? Some have already walked away from the church; others, including nuns, brothers and priests, have expressed a desire to do so if only they could.

There is the breach of trust with the wider community in that the scandals have affected the reputation – or standing in the community – of clergy and religious as a class of people. Damage has been done to the entire prophetic project, to the legacy of many Catholic religious orders, to missionary organisations like The Salvation Army, to the schools.

Religion itself has been damaged, as well; a sense of trust in institutions, particularly church institutions, has been eroded.

In this paper, I want to set the scene for some commentary on nurturing health and integrity in church and ministry by raising firstly an awareness of the issue of adults as vulnerable in the area of abuse. I will explore how adults can be and have been vulnerable, how that vulnerability plays out in religious life (i.e. in the lives of nuns, brothers and religious priests), and how that vulnerability can impact on the capacity of some religious to function with health and integrity in church and ministry.

Finally, I will offer some comments on how we in religious life, particularly those of us who are women, can and must make a contribution towards building a healthy, gospel-focused ecclesial community.

In my professional life as a psychologist, I have worked extensively with religious who have been abused. In this paper, I will at times refer to brief, non-identifiable story summaries I have heard from religious sisters who have been abused.

Religious life is a sub-culture of the church, in that it has its own language, customs, practices, formation, dress, rules and controls by which individuals live within it. This sub-culture is a construction of the church, which regulates the lives of religious through language and particular practices related to the way religious live. The religious learns about the sub-culture through the formation process, which itself is governed by canon law and the particular law of the order. As in societal cultures, the individual in religious life also picks up what is acceptable and what is not, through lived experience of the life.

Power differentials exist not only between adults and children, but also between adults and other adults. Adults can be vulnerable to other adults. For example, there is a power differential between a bishop and a priest, a priest and his parishioners, a religious superior and members of their order. I worked with a young sister once who only ever referred to her religious superior as 'my lover'. There was a sexual as well as a superior-to-sister relationship. Power in religious life can also function via age and/or seniority in terms of years of profession. Disability, intellectual as well as physical, can render an adult powerless, as can personal circumstances such as deep grief, anxiety, fear and sickness.

And then there is gender. It is generally accepted now that in western countries the figures for abuse among women are one in three. Religious sisters are women. There is no reason to believe that the figures are any different among these women. By virtue of their gender alone, in many cultures, in every part of the world, women are culturally disempowered. In some cultures, sexual 'favours' are demanded of women for advancement. Sadly, it is no different in the church culture, where males hold all positions of ultimate power, particularly power over women's lives.

In religious orders, there are women as well as men who have been abused themselves, either as children or as adults. Some religious women and men have been sexually abused in religious life itself. When I was in Rome in 2002, I was told of a superior of a women's order in Africa who wept openly at the major superiors' meeting that year as she told of her sisters who were being abused by priests. She could not confide in the bishop, because he too was involved. When in Rome in June of this year, I heard of, and have been in contact with, an African sister who next year will submit her PhD thesis on the abuse of nuns in her country by priests. In terms of abuse against women – so-called 'domestic' violence – Australia is a violent country. And it doesn't just happen in the home.

A story: A sister had an appointment with a health professional, to be measured and fitted for a therapeutic aid. In spite of her fear and protests, the man sexually abused her in the process. She was told variously by her superiors to 'forget it', to think of Jesus and Mary, and to put it behind her. After she had made three visits to a counsellor, who was not very helpful, she was told by the order that she would have to pay for any further counselling out of her own meagre personal budget money. The order would send her more money if she applied for it. She felt blamed and misunderstood by the superiors. She eventually made a statement to the police after other women came forward in the area. The incident happened when the sister was in her 60s.

As religious we have a moral, ethical and Christian obligation to support those children and vulnerable adults who have been abused, including those in our own orders. The effects of abuse stay with an individual for the whole of their lives. Religious who have been abused themselves are no exception. For religious, these issues can get in the way of supporting others who have been harmed and can impact upon the ability of some religious to confront the damage which has been caused to others.

A story: This sister was abused in her family as a child. She reports having no close friends and does not feel close to anyone. She would love to have a friend but recognises that her anti-social behaviour turns people off. She rebuffs people, which gives out signals contrary to her own deepest needs. She does not relate easily or warmly to anyone.

For religious who have themselves been abused, there may be barriers to engaging with sexual abuse issues *per se* or to engaging with other individuals who have been abused. Some of these barriers include the following:

'I am sitting on my own silence; I can't engage with the bad stories of others.'

'I have personal agendas relating to my abuse which I have not done anything about, like shame, anger.'

'Engaging could set off self-destructive behaviours I have been trying to conceal/control.'

A story: As an adult, this sister was raped by a relative. He was coming out of a difficult marriage, needed to talk and invited her to a meal. He raped her at the end of the evening. She has since been in abusive relationships with priests.

More issues include the following:

'I am likely to get angry if this issue even comes up because no one has been there to acknowledge what happened to me, or they would probably not even believe me if I told them.'

'I cannot tell anyone because my community would not understand/support me.'

A story: This sister had been sexually abused as a child by a relative. Later, when on mission to another country, she was sexually abused by the local priest in the parish. The other sisters in the community would be angry when she tried to protect herself from him by withdrawing from his social visits to the community. She was urged by the superior to 'be nice to Father'. She asked for a move from this mission.

Here are some further examples:

'It is painful for me to listen to other people's stories. I might get angry, sad or experience their trauma as my own.'

'I don't even want to meet with or talk with other survivors of abuse.'

'I might over-engage with other survivors and 'swamp' them with my sympathy/empathy; I may even be tempted to 'comfort' them physically in inappropriate ways.'

'I am fearful that if I engage with a survivor, I might get caught up with the legal processes that they might take up.'

'Religious life used to be a "safe place" for me. It isn't any more. And now I have to be prepared to get involved in this issue and be an enabler of others' safety.'

A story: She was sexually abused as a child, frequently raped. She entered the convent, she said, to escape the abuse. Early in her religious life, the parish priest, whom she considered a friend, arrived drunk at the convent one afternoon and tried to rape her. She fought him off and locked the door. She reported the incident to her major superior who did not believe her and dismissed the incident. She had a hysterectomy in her late 20s. The doctor told her superior at the time that there was 'a lot of damage'. She said that the doctor must have known, which embarrassed her.

What can we do?

Speaking in general terms, and being aware of the difficulties in this area for religious who have been abused themselves, what can we do in religious life towards building communities and engaging in ministerial practice marked by health and safety?

We must ensure that we have called upon the best practice in our entry criteria. I am not only talking here of psychological assessment, which is, in my view, an essential criterion. I am talking also about such issues as the age of the candidate, their life experience so far, developmental issues (including sexual development, emotional, intellectual and social development). Religious life is for grown-ups! It's for adults, not adolescents!

Formation around celibacy in religious life must be inclusive. Heterosexual celibacy formation cannot be the norm any more. Lesbian and gay candidates must be assisted in how to live healthily in same-sex communities.

We should stop accepting that chronic loneliness and isolation is a natural by-product of community living for religious. Everyone needs close friends, inside and outside of the community. Intimacy needs have to be met in healthy ways.

We should be vigilant in the matters of grooming and inappropriate behaviours. As the saying goes, if you see something, say something.

We should foster an environment where those in religious life can speak openly and respectfully with each other about sexual issues, including orientation.

We must work towards justice for survivors, speaking of them and dealing with them with empathy and understanding.

We must be aware of and resist values in our culture and of our church that are antithetical to the values of the Gospel which we openly profess.

We must develop a consciousness of the power of media, advertising and the internet in shaping our views, especially regarding the objectification of women and children (for example, slogans: Just do it! You're worth it! Jokes which demean women, vulnerable adults).

We should cultivate a culture of resistance to toxic societal and cultural values.

We must comply with civil and canonical safeguarding requirements, like police checks, and authorisation of movement between dioceses, states and countries.

So where to from here?

We are at a crossroads in the church culture. As Gospel people, we have an obligation to identify and critique cultural as well church values, some of which are, in fact, anti-Gospel values. I am speaking here of misogyny, racism, disrespect of children, marginalisation of vulnerable people like the elderly, the disabled, the sick and indeed, women. Some of these values are insidiously woven into the fabric of society and sadly, in the case of the experience of many children and women, embedded in the church itself and its structures.

We are truly brought to our knees by this scandal among us. Those of us who have worked closely, in professional contexts, with women and men who have been sexually abused, have been horrified by the stories we have heard. All of us feel deeply a primordial ache for those who have been abused (a 'womb-ache', as women might say).

This is not how it is meant to be among us as Christians, Catholics and religious. Like all the People of God, we in religious life are called to communities and to ministerial practice that is marked by health and integrity particularly in relation to the vulnerable.

Culture is not an excuse for maintaining the status quo. Culture is not an excuse for the abuse of children, women and other vulnerable adults. If cultures, including the church culture, and the sub-culture of religious life, need to be redeemed in this area, we as religious women and men, we as church leaders, should be at the head of the protest movement to reclaim the goodness of our cultures. We do not, and should not, have a choice here.

The patriarchal culture of the church, the culture that privileges males over females, and where the dominant symbolism is male, needs to be eroded, bit by bit. Women are more than their bodies. Women have a divine and human right to be more than objects, more than objects for abuse by others, including by others in the church. Women too are made in the image and likeness of God. Women's voting arms have been in plaster for too many centuries in our church. Women must claim the right to raise a voting arm where it counts in the church. Women's official voice in the church must be heard.

There were about 3,000 bishops at Vatican II, and 23 women – for the last two sessions only. They were there as officially invited auditors (one of them was an Australian laywoman, Rosemary Goldie). Their number made up 1% of those attending the Council. Cardinal Suenens recalled in his memoirs, published in 1992, that he had to persuade Pope Paul VI to allow the women observers to take communion (on the tongue) from the pope's hand. Women were present, but their mouths were kept shut except for taking communion. Women must, one day, take their equal place at the table, and I include at the eucharistic table. The sacramental nature of women's ministry must be honoured. I believe we must all continue to work towards reclaiming what has been denied to women for centuries in our church.

As the People of God, we are all called, women and men, to be the face and the grace of humanity, to be the face and the grace of divinity in our societies, and in our churches. The Gospel calls us to this way of being in the same way that Jesus of Nazareth was called to be the face and the grace of the divine to us all. It will take courage, persistence and solidarity among women and men in our church to respond to this call with honesty and energy.

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