

Listening to Victims of Abuse

This is the text of the 2012 London Newman Lecture. It was given on March 23rd by Baroness Sheila Hollins, Professor of the Psychiatry of Learning Disability at St George's, University of London, and President-Elect of the British Medical Association, at St Alban's Centre, Holborn.

The occurrence of child sexual abuse is much higher in society at large than anyone would ever have thought, and it is extraordinary to think that this scourge remained hidden for so long. Why were we so blind? 11 per cent of female and 5 per cent of male respondents to the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Household Survey (7,353 respondents) reported contact or penetrative abuse in childhood. Very importantly this survey also found that mental health problems including depression, personality disorder, drug and alcohol misuse, eating disorders and psychosis were significantly increased, as was the risk of suicide amongst those who had reported abuse. It was clear that child sexual abuse was not only more common, but had a greater impact in women.

The study also confirmed an association reported in many other studies between abuse in childhood and revictimisation. The mental health impacts found in this and other research is of considerable importance to me as a psychiatrist. My own professional background includes 30-plus years of clinical and research experience in child and family psychiatry, in psychotherapy and as a learning disability psychiatrist with an interest in trauma and sexual abuse.

Knowing of my experience, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor invited me to assist him in his role as one of six Vatican Visitors to the Church in Ireland in February 2011. The four Metropolitan Sees were visited, as were the Seminaries and the Religious Institutes. The summary of the Visitation report was published just a couple of days ago. One of the points made in the report is that 'those who should have exercised vigilance often failed to do so' and the Visitors verified that 'progressive steps have been taken towards a greater awareness of how serious is the problem of abuse...' The report recommended that the Church authorities should continue to spend much time listening to and providing support for victims and their families. It also commended the work of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church, and the work of the men and women involved at all levels in the safeguarding structures.

Abuse is widespread

Abuse happens in all societies and amongst all kinds of people and professions. The clergy probably has a lower incidence of abusers than other 'professions', but the position of authority held by a priest makes the offence particularly distressing and possibly more difficult to uncover. Nor were church leaders alone in failing to understand the seriousness of abuse when it was reported to them. I can remember in 1971 when I took my first job in paediatrics, working in a hospital that was doing pioneering work on the recognition of physical abuse and neglect of children. The medical profession doubted the hospital's work, and it was many, many years before the reality of abuse, whether physical, sexual or emotional became more widely accepted. And in mental health services the part played by sexual abuse in the causation of mental disorders is only recently being recognized.

Participating in the Irish visit was the beginning of a new phase in my professional

interest and work around sexual abuse. Certainly my experience as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist seemed to help in the many meetings with victims and family members, and in the publicly-advertised meetings held around the Diocese of Armagh as part of the Vatican Visitation.

In February this year I was invited to speak at the *'Towards Healing and Renewal'* Symposium hosted by the Gregorian University in Rome. The four-day event in Rome also marked the beginning of a global project to develop e-learning resources in many languages, to support the best possible arrangements to protect children from abuse, and to advise Bishops on how to respond speedily and effectively when allegations of abuse are made. Speakers at the Symposium came from all regions of the world and included consideration of the perpetrators of abuse, national and diocesan responses, the selection and formation of priests, as well as cultural and theological issues. The participants included Bishops and other senior clergy and religious from more than 100 countries. Cardinal William Levada, from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, opened the conference and brought a message of support from Pope Benedict. I had been asked to speak about the effect of sexual abuse on victims and had agreed to do so if I could share the platform with a survivor of abuse. I felt strongly that for me to speak about the long-term effects on victims separately from a victim of abuse would have been insensitive. The voice of the victim should always be central to any discussion of the experience of victims and survivors. Mrs. Marie Collins, who had been abused as a child in Ireland, bravely agreed to work with me on a joint presentation.

Voice of experience

I did not meet her during my visit to Armagh; rather she was recommended to me as someone who speaks well about her own experience, and who has made effective use of the media in raising awareness of the long term effects of clerical sexual abuse. For Mrs. Collins to speak about her experience of clerical sexual abuse on her own could have been seen as the voice of just one victim. By bringing both personal testimony and my clinical experience together, we hoped that our jointly prepared and shared keynote talk at the very beginning of the Symposium would stimulate an open and honest discussion of the issues facing the Church. I had been anxious beforehand about how Marie would cope when faced with a mainly male audience, the majority of whom would be wearing clerical dress. We decided that our husbands should accompany us, and they were given places for the duration of the Symposium. Some participants remarked upon this as their presence emphasized that we were also almost the only lay people present, quite apart from being the only lay presenters and the only married people. There was another woman speaker – a theologian who is a member of a religious community. We both coped well with our minority status, although the constant use of my title 'Baroness' made me wonder if I had become an honorary man for the occasion!

Our paper was called: *Listening, Understanding and Acting to Heal and Empower Victims*. Although Marie was Irish and I had been to Ireland as part of the Visitation, our task was to try to draw lessons of global relevance. The church worldwide has been sluggish in getting to grips with the urgency of this problem - it is not just an Irish issue. Our talks were checked by the Vatican Secretariat of State and translated into the four conference languages. The wording - but not the meaning - of mine

changed in a couple of places to try to avoid any sensitivity with the Church in Ireland. I had confirmed that my talk would not comment on the conclusions in the Cardinal Murphy O'Connor's report about the Diocese of Armagh to the Holy See.

Even so, the Irish Catholic Bishops' conference misquoted something I said, with the effect of misrepresenting the essence of my message.

They accused me of saying that "very few victims had received an apology and hardly any had received compensation", a statement which would have been untrue. Actually I did not say this. But I did say: "In Ireland *it is believed and it is said* that too few victims have received counselling and compensation...."

I was surprised they were unable to understand a comment made by me about public perceptions. There is a world of difference between facts and perceptions and they are both important. The symposium evaluators summed up at the end with a phrase which captured one of the points that I was trying to make: that justice delayed is justice denied. In other words, that there must be a timeliness and voluntariness about confession, reparation and reconciliation.

The published version of our talk says: "Victims' groups may feel that any counselling offered is too little and too late, however hard church authorities have tried to respond to identified needs. In my experience the lack of an admission of guilt and of an apology is usually a bigger barrier to healing and recovery than the payment of compensation or the provision of therapy".

Mrs. Collins and I wanted to leave participants in no doubt that not being believed about an allegation of sexual abuse increases the emotional and mental suffering it causes. We wanted them to understand that if an abuser refuses to admit his guilt, or if his superiors fail to take appropriate action, then their suffering will be further increased. We also wanted to get them to think about the meaning of abuse being committed by a priest and to consider how some priest abusers cover up their behaviour.

Visits by the chaplain

Those listening were visibly moved by Marie's description of her own abuse by the chaplain when she was hospitalized as a teenager. She described how as a recently confirmed teenager, she initially welcomed the chaplain's visits, in the morning to bring her communion and in the evening to befriend her. The evening visits soon became abusive and, when she protested, he tried to persuade her that, as a priest, he could do no wrong. She didn't think anyone would believe her word against his. Marie blamed herself and felt dirty and ashamed, a not untypical response of girls to abuse. She went on to suffer years of depression and anxiety and the long-term effects on her life were immense, including problems at work and problems in relationships. It was still many years before her abuser was named and brought to justice. When he admitted his guilt, and the church authorities finally admitted their complicity in covering up his abuse, she was able to benefit from therapy.

She said: "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."

If they were not believed the first time they mentioned it some victims will not speak

again about their experience, instead trying to forget. They may not recognise the impact of the abuse on their self-esteem, their confidence and their ability to make relationships. Others elaborate on their abuse in the hope of being heard, but in the process also making false allegations. Such people are readily accused of lying and the truth behind their original 'story' remains unbelievable. Many who have kept quiet for fear of not being believed will break down in adulthood at times of stress or perhaps in response to media coverage about a similar case to their own.

Defining abuse

At the Symposium, Mgr. Charles Scicluna, the Vatican's chief prosecutor, defined abuse as a violation of the 6th Commandment. He described it as a deliberate external act that corrupts someone more vulnerable, without necessarily including touch, including for example, through a person exposing himself or herself or showing pornography.

He defined minors as persons under 18 but also explained that when Canon Law was updated in 2010, the Church extended the definition to include adults with cognitive and mental disabilities. This last point is very important for me, as so much of my work has been with adults with learning disabilities. This update of Canon Law also gave the Church the power to dismiss priests charged with sexual offences.

One of the saddest things that emerged for me from the Vatican's own figures is the fact that priest/religious perpetrators have often harmed more than one person. A case is not a victim. The Vatican defines a case as a priest or religious, and in the 10 years since they took on responsibility for examining cases 4,000 have been referred to them.

Listening to victims is something that requires a change in mindset by everyone concerned with the safety of a child or vulnerable adult. Our aim must be to prevent abuse, but also to be alert to the possibility of abuse so that it can be stopped and the victim's safety assured. Of course, it also means making sure that there will be no future victims by the same perpetrator.

What should parents and teachers do to protect children? This brings me to the important topic of love and relationships education - too many Catholic parents think that they are the right people to tell their children about sex, when they think their child is ready. Teenagers disagree - they would rather learn from teachers and peers. What is important is that children are not left in ignorance about their bodies and that they have the language to tell their parent or teacher if someone does something that makes them feel uncomfortable. Some of our Catholic schools have an excellent reputation for providing sex education, but others are reportedly discouraged by a minority of parents who object to sex education being on the curriculum for fear that this will of itself sexualize their child.

Sadly, many adults do not recognise the symptoms and signs of abuse, perhaps reprimanding a child for masturbating rather than asking if anybody has touched them. It is also the case that many people in positions of authority do not have the listening skills which enable them to hear about someone's experience of abuse. Sometimes this is born of naivety or lack of training. Sometimes it is linked to the person's own experience of victimhood, which prevents them from having the necessary empathy to engage with another victim. This points to the need for Church authorities to work with appropriately qualified and experienced professionals. There is no reason why a Bishop should have all the skills that lay professionals have spent years acquiring.

There are effective therapeutic approaches, which help people to work through their feelings of being helpless and hurt at the hands of someone more powerful than themselves. Flashbacks and nightmares do subside after specialist counselling or therapy but it takes time and is helped if the perpetrator has apologized. The problem is that even if the perpetrator himself - and it is most commonly a man - has admitted his guilt and apologized, his supervisors must accept some responsibility too.

Some people who have been abused begin to abuse others. Fortunately it is a minority, although more survivors probably live in fear that their fantasies of revenge might lead to an abusive act against another vulnerable person. Instead of being the powerless victim, the abuser becomes powerful and in control, much as the victim of bullying and the bully can change roles too. Moreover some priests will have been abused in childhood, and this should be a matter of concern about whether they receive enough therapeutic support before and during their own formation.

I think there is much that we still have to learn about abuse and the steps that need to be taken to prevent abuse happening again. Mgr. Rossetti spoke convincingly at the Symposium about mistakes and action in the USA. His first point was that we must listen to victims, and not be manipulated by offenders: this is what he called 'a victim first policy'.



He described the original mistaken belief that perpetrators could be safely cured and become risk-free. As Mgr. Rossetti points out, forgiveness of perpetrators is not the same as reassignment of convicted priests to ministry. In North America relapse prevention programmes have been developed, which support a 'good life model' of a healthy and productive life in which offenders are helped to cope with their sexuality. They do not demonise offenders but nor do they allow them to have contact with children and vulnerable adults.

Some priests have spoken about their own sexual immaturity when they entered a seminary saying that they had little understanding of the meaning of celibacy until after they had been ordained. Incidentally there is no evidence that celibacy is the cause of abuse, or that having a married clergy would eliminate abuse from the Church. There may be other reasons for arguing the case for married priests but in my view abuse is probably not one of them.

One Bishop from a developing country stressed the role of mentors for newly ordained priests to support their ongoing spiritual and emotional development. Another stressed the importance of non-exclusive friendship and affection and the need for priests to rediscover the central place of affection in relationships. In many ways they were echoing my concerns, expressed in a short piece for *The Tablet* in 2010, on what I would say if I had five minutes with the Pope. *The Tablet* titled my piece 'Priests need a Hug a Day'. I was suggesting that as lay people there was more we

could do to support our priests with friendship.

And what can the church do to help people who have been abused to continue to practice their faith? Is spiritual renewal and healing something that is also on offer? This is something that Marie Collins feels strongly about. There is a sense that the institutional church sees its responsibilities as the legal ones of saying sorry, providing compensation and therapy. But what about their pastoral role?

Perhaps this is where a greater lay involvement in the pastoral and spiritual care of victims and indeed also of perpetrators, comes in. This may be particularly important if the hierarchy has failed to provide a prompt response to a victim's complaint.

I would like to emphasise three points:

Firstly 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.

Secondly that recovery is slow and some never recover fully from the mental health consequences of such a profound abuse of power and trust - especially when the abuser is a priest.

Thirdly that support and friendship, and a willingness to listen -time and again -to the anger and fragility that remains, will require considerable patience. And I mean patience!

Finally I cannot end without saying that the Rome Symposium was a real sign of hope. Countries across the world that have faced up to the abuse scandal, such as the USA, South Africa and the Philippines, shared their mistakes and their learning with other countries. Other delegates, who had arrived perhaps thinking this was largely a western problem, returned home understanding the universality of abuse and the need to take urgent steps to safeguard minors in their own countries and to develop guidelines as required by the Holy See. Once people's eyes have been opened to the seriousness and enormity of this problem, it is impossible to ignore. No one who heard Marie Collins's testimony will forget.

As for my role, as a lay person with professional expertise that a Bishop would not usually have, I feel I have been able to help the church address this problem and although my comments may have seemed critical at times, they were offered in a spirit of partnership, perhaps signalling the kind of new role for lay people that the Vatican report to Ireland is calling for.

Baroness Sheila Hollins

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