

## **Submission to The Royal Commission on the Institutional Response of the Catholic Church to child sexual abuse Issues Paper 11 .**

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My name is Fr Peter Maher, parish priest of St Joseph's Newtown NSW.

I write as a priest who has pastorally cared for a number of people sexually abused. I have also pastorally supervised people in ministry as an accredited Pastoral Supervisor for 8 years. I wish to comment on Issues Paper 11.

### **Accountability, supervision, spiritual direction and professional development**

Accountability is complex in the priesthood because it involves theological, historical and cultural factors.

A story: when I was coordinator for the secular university chaplains in Sydney diocese (1997-2003) Bishop Geoff Robinson had put in place funded professional appraisal, regular pastoral supervision and regular professional in-servicing for chaplains. This took a while to implement partly for reasons outlined below but mostly, in this context where most chaplains were not ordained, because it was a new initiative in 1996. When then Archbishop Pell was appointed to Sydney in 2001, he quickly assumed Bishop Robinson's overseeing role in respect of university chaplaincy. So I met with him about what was happening in Sydney diocese.

On the issues of accountability: professional appraisal, regular pastoral supervision, regular professional in-servicing and membership of the Tertiary Campus Ministers Association (TCMA) and its yearly conference, bishop Pell's comments, although I can't remember exact words, amounted to the cancellation of all of these for any new chaplains. He made it clear that current chaplains could continue their practice in these areas but that he would be initiating new chaplaincies in the secular universities and these chaplains would not be subject to the old regime of accountability because he felt it was not necessary. This was a decision that was within his authority to implement so I am in no way implying it was misuse of power. However it does serve to understand the thinking at the time of Archbishop Pell.

Why is this? The importance of taking seriously the issue of clergy accountability was already known as is evidenced by the message of the Australia Bishops (Nov 29, 2002, <https://www.catholic.org.au/documents/493-a-message-from-the-australian-catholic-bishops-conference-to-the-catholic-people-of-australia-1/file>) where they note a "concern to respond adequately to issues of sexual abuse within the Church", and they commit to "renew our resolve to follow our agreed procedures" by "accept[ing] the need for accountability and consistency in all that we do" and to "propose that the National Committee for Professional Standards continue to assess and refine these procedures".

This commitment led to the document, *Integrity in Ministry* (2004, reprinted 2010, <https://www.catholic.org.au/documents/1344-integrity-in-ministry-2010-1/file>) which clearly outlines how clergy should maintain accountability (4.1 p10) as:

- "keeping abreast of literature in the area of pastoral care;
- attending seminars/in-services related to pastoral care;
- reflecting regularly on one's pastoral practice with a competent supervisor or colleague;
- ongoing development of one's knowledge and understanding of Scripture, Church tradition and teaching;
- remaining updated in the social sciences and disciplines that contribute to pastoral skill."

And in 4.2 it goes on:

- "regularly undertaking appropriate professional development;
- keeping up-to-date with the literature and developments relevant to their ministry;
- active membership of relevant professional associations".

Where these recommendations failed to either maintain professional accountability or initiate appropriate measures to support and safeguard professional and ethical ministry, I believe have their roots in three factors: theological, historical and cultural. What do these mean in my opinion?

### **Theological**

The ecclesiology of Vatican II offered the image of the people of God as the primary metaphor for the church. This theology suggests that baptism confers a common status on all Christians. However the competing theology of the superior status of the ordained is not by any means abandoned by Catholic theology and, if anything, is emphasised in seminaries to restore clerical power and status in an effort to bring about what is seen, by some, as correcting the excesses of Vatican II.

Clerical status is reinforced in the church through a theology of sacred orders and its subsequent theology of conferring ontological change which invites a sense of superiority over other baptised. This is expressed and lived, sometimes inappropriately, in expressions of authority, cultural assumptions of power and control and a tendency towards 'a priest can do no wrong'. It can be outwardly reinforced in dress codes. It can be problematic where it

serves to confuse social, professional and spiritual boundaries or contributes to a sense of authority that may exhibit itself as abuse of power. This sometimes can contribute to a culture of being above others and inappropriately expressing superiority and spiritual power. This can lead to power abuse in pastoral practices. It may be experienced as bullying.

Unbalanced ecclesiology and soteriology (or more likely, the dangerous delusion that I am responsible for your salvation) and a warped idea of ministerial theology (ie as a service to the community) are factors that can lead to inappropriate and unaware behaviour (cf. *Integrity in Ministry*, p 1-9)

This can lead priests to believe they have no need of on-going formation, reflection and guidance or that they only need spiritual direction which can be either too removed from pastoral practice concentrating on the relationship with God to the exclusion of actual practice and pastoral care, or it can be so spiritualised that it avoids the social, psychological and professional ethics and competency skills that when unattended to can lead to abuse of power in pastoral settings.

### **Historical**

The impact of the 'culture wars', as they are sometimes called, on the catholic church in Australia might be taken into account as a way of understanding the why priests sometimes act like warriors rather than companions in pastoral care. The belief that "the church needs rescuing from the excesses of Vatican II" as it is sometimes perceived, leads to an enthusiasm in ministry that can be obsessive and self absorbed, rather than gentle and respectful.

This is evident in the restorationists in the church seen in clergy of all ages who feel they have a mandate to teach that sometimes can be experienced as bullying because of their confidence in their own truth born of such matters as discussed above. This contributes to possible power abuse in unreflective clergy who are not engaging with the recommendations of *Integrity in Ministry* (chapter4).

Another factor is the way bishops and authority are perceived by priests. This has a historical influence. Priests experience accountability only when they have transgressed in some way according to the authority. This has number of effects:

- priests are used to negative experiences of accountability
- priests steer clear of authority and accountability
- priests believe they have ultimate authority in their parishes. Canon law supports this view by noting the priest can only be removed in extreme circumstances and the priest has recourse to appeal bishops' decisions to the Vatican Congregation for Clergy. The existence of this right of appeal against the priest's own bishop attests to the historical abuse of clergy by bishops and authority.
- priests are afraid appraisal and supervision will raise the possibility of power abuse towards them.
- many priests tell stories of being accused and/or treated unjustly because of false accusation.
- this climate tends to leave priests in an adult/child kind of relationship to people in authority (a kind of "don't tell" approach to avoid having to justify approaches or

practices). This contributes to a climate of secrecy, always the enemy of accountability and transparency and the friend of abusive behaviour.

**Cultural**

My comments above about theological and historical factors contribute largely to a culture of secrecy, looking inward, non-accountability and arrogance.

My reflections above suggest that the theology and culture around the training, development, accountability and pastoral practice of Catholic clergy are very much integral to addressing sexual abuse of minors by clergy in the Catholic church. These factors impact on failures in initial screening, psychosexual assessment before and after ordination, sexual maturity and professional ethical practice (akin to all the helping professions).

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

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Fr Peter Maher. 30.6.16