

Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Context of Child Sexual Abuse

Eugene Duffy

Introduction

When one talks of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation in the context of Child Sexual Abuse, one is moving in a highly emotive area. We are still dealing with an area of experience that has only in very recent times come to public prominence and awareness. In preparing this paper, I looked at what was one of the most enlightened moral theology text books in the eighties, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, written by Bernard Häring in 1981.¹ It dealt with the ethics of topical issues such as ecology and information technology but it contained no mention of Child Sexual Abuse. It mentioned various kinds of sexual deviance, including masochism, sadism, fetishism and bestiality, but did not mention Child Sexual Abuse. Thus one has to conclude that, even in very enlightened areas of moral discourse, Child Sexual Abuse is a relative newcomer. This, however, is not to suggest that it is a new phenomenon. Rather, the changes in culture and particularly, I suspect, the development of feminism, have created the conditions in which this painful and destructive issue can be spoken about with some degree of freedom. Since it is such a relatively new subject of discourse, none of us is yet entirely comfortable dealing with it or speaking of it.

This unease is reflected in the public coverage which the issue receives in the media. One of the tabloid papers, recently, had sensational headlines following the conviction of a Christian Brother for child sexual abuse. It read: '5 Year Hell at Hands of Pervert Cleric'. We all remember the headlines following the conviction of Brendan Smith: 'Rot in Hell', and the sinister looking man who was shown grimacing at the cameras as he was led

from the courtroom. This sensationalised approach to the issue is a reflection of the deep anger that is caused when people realise that vulnerable and innocent people have been abused by those in whom they should have been able to place their trust and confidence. There is the realisation that power has been abused and serious violence done to the weak and vulnerable. Inevitably, too, it taps into the very ambiguity of all our own sexual energies and our potentialities for abusing our own power in relationships. These possibilities which are within ourselves are not yet well explored and so their ambiguities generate fear of ourselves, which can be directed outwards in anger towards others who may be seen to act out our own worst fears about ourselves.

The reality is that we are dealing with a relatively new phenomenon in our discourse and so there is a certain inevitability that sensationalised ideas and information are in possession. If there is to be any talk of healing, reconciliation and forgiveness, then these must be situated in the context of truth and informed discussion. In the first paper, Attracta Shields explored the most recent research that is available in this area. One of the significant issues that she raised was the importance of understanding Child Sexual Abuse in the context of the systemic factors which contribute to its emergence. Child Sexual Abuse can also be viewed in some instances as a serious psychological pathology. Just as one must attempt to understand the pathology of those who abuse, one must also try to have a better grasp of the effects which this abuse has on the survivors. Here, too, there are degrees of damage and recovery. On both sides of the issue we need to continue to be better informed than we are at the moment. We have a serious responsibility to keep ourselves as informed as we can on the best contemporary research. At the same time, even that research will always have a provisional character and so there is a need for a genuine openness to new information and new insights as we try to get to the truth of this issue.

Forgiveness and the survivor

It is far too easy to focus on instant forgiveness and to expect

that those who have suffered abuse can easily forgive and forget. For people who are involved in ministry this can be a first temptation because the Christian message is so strong on the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is indeed an important part of the Christian response to injustices perpetrated against us, but there must be a serious recognition that forgiveness and reconciliation are a long process and, in the end, a gift from God, not something which we can easily manipulate. We can be Pelagian in our approach and say 'you should' or 'I must forgive and be reconciled', forgetting that God gives the gifts we need in God's time and these come through a process of healing and prayer.

On the negative side, it is important to be aware that urging someone to instant forgiveness can be a sign of our own discomfort with the anger and grief of the survivor. It can be a form of denial and a means of suppressing our own feelings or avoiding having to deal with them. Genuine forgiveness must allow the truth to emerge, with all its pain, its anger and grief. As we read in chapter three, it is very important that there is someone there who is prepared to listen attentively and non-judgmentally to the story that the survivor has to tell. This process can not be short-circuited and it may take a very long time for the whole truth to be told and acknowledged. The person, then, has to be helped to work through all the pain, fear, anger, powerlessness and even feelings of guilt which may be associated with the past experiences. Forgiveness would be premature if these stages of the process are not acknowledged and the person allowed the opportunity to integrate these into the whole of her or his life. Somehow, the person has to have the time and space to get in touch with his or her own strength, power and beauty.

Part of the process of healing and forgiveness for the survivor must be self-forgiveness. Because Child Sexual Abuse has been such a taboo subject, most survivors tend to blame themselves to some extent for what has happened. This can be reinforced by the person who has perpetrated the abuse imputing some responsibility in their direction. The promise of affection

and acknowledgement is sometimes easily accepted by those who have been deprived of these important supports in their childhood and, therefore, they can be especially vulnerable to the advances of the someone who is a paedophile. This alone should alert us to the innocence that has been exploited and abused. The task, then, is to enable the person to acquire and develop a sense of his or her own dignity, value and beauty in all their relationships and ultimately in their relationship with God.

Forgiveness can only be forthcoming if the survivors have been able to let go their feelings of shame and guilt, pain, anger and grief. The facilitation of this is a very skilled task and can only be done by someone who is well equipped to undertake it. Obviously the development of psychology and counselling skills play a big part in this process and, from the Christian perspective, these must be viewed as a God-given gift to be used for the good of each person. Whatever enables the person to grow and flourish has to be seen as an instance of God's gracefulness towards humankind. As our survivor's story reminds us, one of the phrases which put her on the road to recovery was that line from an early theologian in the church, which she heard at a talk: 'The glory of God is the human person fully alive.'

Forgiveness and those who abuse

The question of forgiveness for those who have abused is a much more emotive and sensitive issue than is the question for the survivor. In this section I would like to focus on the forgiveness which the community may be called upon to extend to the person responsible for the abuse. The current lack of knowledge about the causes of this kind of behaviour, and the extent to which it has been sensationalised in the media, make a reasonable response all the more difficult.

The language which we use in describing people is something to which we have become much more sensitive and this is good because it raises our awareness of the person's dignity. So, for instance, we do not talk about the mentally handicapped, we talk of *people* with a mental handicap. We put the emphasis on

the uniqueness of the person, not on their disability. Similarly, I think we need to speak of people who have abused, rather than of abusers or perpetrators. One of the strengths of the Christian tradition is that it can distinguish the sinner from the sin. Therefore, I suggest that we have to begin by acknowledging the dignity of the person who has sexually abused others and make some effort to understand where he or she may be coming from and how his or her background has in some way conditioned the abusive behaviour.

Our knowledge gleaned from psychology and psychiatry with regard to Child Sexual Abuse is still at an early stage. However, there is evidence to suggest that a person's predisposition to commit these offences can have roots in chemical imbalances in the brain, or in the fact that they may have been exposed to privation, violence or abuse in their own childhood. There is also another social factor which may contribute to the fact that more men seem to abuse than women. The fact is that men are more socialised and conditioned to exercise power and strength than women and, therefore, their exercise of power and violence has culturally, perhaps, been more accepted than should be the case. A certain acceptance of the dominant male may be one of the contributory factors to abuse not having been spoken of openly until relatively recently. In this context, too, it may be worth noting that those who abuse are usually not strangers on the rampage, but people known to the child or people in positions of recognised trust and responsibility – fathers, uncles, other relatives, clergy, teachers, healthcare personnel and sports coaches. For the most part, those who abuse are not a foreign breed seeking those whom they can abuse; rather they are among those whom we know and trust.

The French have a proverb which says that to understand all is to forgive all. I am not here arguing for any cheap grace, but I am suggesting that our understanding of why people abuse their power in acts of sexual violence on others needs more development. A better understanding of the reasons which trigger the abusive behaviour will not diminish the pain and the dam-

age to those who have been abused, but it may make us less ready to condemn harshly the person who has inflicted such harm on them.

Of course, people who abuse need to be brought face to face with the reality of their offences. They have to be helped to name the wrong which they have done because forgiveness depends, too, on the person appreciating his or her own need for forgiveness and reconciliation. St Luke, the most compassionate evangelist says, 'If your brother does something wrong, reprove him and, if he is sorry, forgive him' (17:3). Repentance is no light-hearted matter in the scriptures; it involves a desire to change one's attitude, accompanied by steps that lead to a change of behaviour. Unless a person has some appreciation of the seriousness of what they have done they will not even hear the word of forgiveness.

A concept which used to be strong in the Catholic tradition was restitution. If you stole something from another you were expected to make restitution before forgiveness was complete. In the case of Child Sexual Abuse it may be worth considering that those who have been responsible for the abuse should be expected to make some restitution by way of paying for counselling and therapy for their victims where this is possible. It may be a much more important and valuable approach than the purely punitive one to which we have had exclusive recourse up to this point.

Our ineptitude, at present, in dealing with Child Sexual Abuse was highlighted in the contrasting funeral liturgies of Brendan O'Donnell and Brendan Smith. It was quite clear that O'Donnell had severe psychiatric problems which had arisen from a variety of sources, not least his own familial background. He committed very serious crimes – violently killing a mother, her child and a priest. When he died the bishop and some priests from the diocese of Clonfert, where the crimes had been committed, attended the funeral and, on behalf of the victims, spoke words of healing and forgiveness. This could happen, I suspect, because people knew that this young man

was seriously disturbed and could not be held totally responsible in any normal way for the enormity of his crime.

When Smith died, the obsequies were carried out in the middle of the night under the lights of a digger. There were no bishops or visiting clergy present. This man, too, had committed enormous crimes and a very significant number of people have been seriously damaged by what he did to them. However, there did not seem to be any understanding of the fact that this man, too, was indeed a seriously sick man. If we could acknowledge that, then our response could be more mature and constructive.

Those who commit sexual abuse against children are the contemporary lepers in our society. They are to be kept outside the city gates. They can easily become the scapegoats for all kinds of sexual deviance in our midst; Child Sexual Abuse is judged to be the worst form of deviance and therefore our abhorrence of any kind of sexual deviance is directed against this group. This is true within the prison community too, which is merely a microcosm of the wider society. It seems to be acceptable that their concessions within the prison system are even more limited than those serving sentences for any other category of crime. They are imprisoned and without any realistic treatment to address their condition. This is a serious issue. There is evidence that treatment does have a positive outcome in very many situations. There is no doubt that the resources which would be required to provide adequate treatment would be an enormous financial burden to society, but the question has to be asked: does capital have priority over the person? The cost must surely act as a deterrent for attempting a genuinely humane response to this problem. On the other hand, it is hard to see what treatment could work out as any more costly than the current costs of imprisonment in this country.

It cannot be denied that there is also another even more serious responsibility on the state, namely, to protect those who are vulnerable and who may be at risk from people who may abuse them. However, in general the most serious risks come from

within families and relationships of trust and responsibility, not, for the most part, from strangers on the loose. Therefore it seems unlikely that the state can ever adequately protect those who are at risk of being sexually abused.

Challenges for the church

Child Sexual Abuse is a real problem for the church to deal with, especially among those who hold positions of responsibility. The church in the past described itself as the perfect society. Although it no longer does so, it understands itself to be a community guided by the Holy Spirit, the sacrament of salvation, a genuinely holy people. Therefore, to have to admit serious crime and sinfulness in the very heart of this community is particularly painful, and so the natural tendency is either towards denial or over zealous reaction once the evil has been exposed. This is compounded further by a theology of priesthood which speaks of ontological change effected by ordination, a change which cannot be reversed by any human power. This tends to put the priest into another category of being apart from the ordinary baptised member of the church. It makes accountability and dismissal difficult. Thus one can see that, for church authorities dealing with this issue, not only are there all the difficulties that others in society have to cope with, but they also have to struggle with theological considerations which may act as inhibiting factors.

Here, perhaps there is a new opportunity for a prophetic response to a serious social problem, one which will respect the dignity of those who have abused, on the one hand, and on the other, one which will protect the vulnerable, the weak and those at risk. Is it possible that some new form of community could be created where these people who have abused could find a home, with proper therapeutic facilities, proper supervision and the opportunity, when and as appropriate, to be reintegrated into a normal living situation, where their weakness is acknowledged, without having to be treated in purely punitive fashion? In this way their dignity could be restored and honoured, as Christ al-

ways seemed to do with the sinner and, at the same time, the concerns of the wider society would be safeguarded. The challenge to stand with the public sinner is never an easy one, yet it is the great paradox of the sinless Jesus that he was himself condemned for his socialising with the public sinners of his time, including those guilty of sexual deviance. Our forgiveness cannot be confined to the privacy of the confessional, where the hidden sins are absolved, even the most heinous of crimes. It is important for us to remember that God loves all sinners, those whose sins are public just as much as those whose sins remain private and unknown.

Notes:

1. *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Vol III, Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1981.