



Chapter One

**Introduction:
A whole-Church perspective**



1. What the report is about and how the research was done

This report is about the impact and implications of clerical child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. It explores how the abuse crisis has been experienced by different groups within the Church, most painfully by victims and survivors of abuse and their families, and also affecting parish communities, laypeople, priests, deacons, bishops, religious communities and others. It is a crisis because it has tested and, in some ways, broken crucial parts of what we thought we knew about ourselves as a Catholic community. It has caused deep harm and damage, and the impact continues still, most profoundly for victims and survivors, and for our life as a Church and our mission here in England and Wales. Our concern in this report is not just with the impact of the abuse itself, but also with how it has been handled and mishandled by institutional figures and processes and how this has affected our confidence and relationships in the Church.

The report explores how some of our habits and practices as a Church are implicated in how clerical child abuse was allowed to happen and how the pastoral and institutional response has often caused further pain and harm. It is now well accepted in broader study about abuse in the Catholic Church that we need to look beyond the idea that abuse happens because of a few 'bad apples'. Whilst individual abusers are always responsible for their own actions, there are structures, cultures and practices which contribute to the many factors involved in the harm done. Since those structures, cultures and practices have roots in our faith and in Catholic teaching and theology, we need to examine aspects of these too. This is a search not just for explanations but more importantly for greater fidelity. Pope Francis has proposed that to move forward, we need 'a continuous and profound conversion of hearts attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the Church'.¹ We need to become a more compassionate, just and truthful community, one that reflects ever more deeply what the Gospel means in practice.

This report seeks to encourage us to pay better attention to an experience which has shocked and shaken the Catholic Church here in England and Wales and in many other countries. In responding as a whole church, it is not enough to ensure that there are strong and effective safeguarding standards, policies and procedures and professional safeguarding staff. We must listen and work to understand more fully what this crisis means and to nurture a culture which faces up to the questions asked with honesty and humility.



Explaining the research

The report is based on research undertaken by a team working within the Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS) at Durham University in the UK. The research, named the Boundary Breaking project, began in 2019 and finished in 2023. It was funded by Porticus, a Catholic grant-making trust, and two religious orders, the British province of the Jesuits and the English Benedictine Congregation. The team consisted of Dr Marcus Pound, Dr Catherine Sexton and Dr Pat Jones, working with assistance and advice from Professor Paul D. Murray and Professor Karen Kilby and supported by Yvonne Williams. Dr Giuseppe Bollota was part of the research team in the first year and Adrian Brooks joined the team for eighteen months to undertake a literature review to assist the theological reflection. To support the research, a steering committee was set up, chaired by Dr Julie Clague from the University of Glasgow. In addition, there was a stakeholder group bringing together a group of people with relevant expertise or experience and/or representing bodies such as the Conference of Religious, the body that brings together the leaders of religious congregations working in England and Wales.² Both groups included members who are survivors of abuse. The research has operated under strong ethical principles as required both by the nature of the task and by Durham University.

The research focussed primarily on the sexual abuse of children involving diocesan and religious priests or brothers that had taken place in Catholic institutions in England and Wales. This was not an exclusive focus. Several survivors who spoke to us described abuse carried out by laypeople teaching in Catholic schools, and a couple of the survivors were older when the abuse happened, young adults in a position where their abusers held power over their lives in some way. In other words, we examined sexual abuse where the institution and ministry or leadership structures of the Church were implicated. We also gave priority to the exploration of *sexual* abuse, whilst recognising that this is part of a spectrum which includes emotional, physical and spiritual abuse. Some survivors had experienced all these dimensions. All are damaging and wrong and some are criminal. Our focus is on sexual abuse because this is uniquely intrusive and harmful, as wider literature affirms, and on abuse by priests, because this is such a deep betrayal of ethical and theological principles which are central to Catholic faith and teaching.

From the beginning, the aim in this research has been to offer a constructive and useful resource to the Catholic community in England and Wales. The report provides a narrative of how the whole community has experienced the impact of the abuse crisis as well as analysis and reflection on cultures and systems implicated in how abuse has happened. As far as we are aware, there is no other research in these countries which allows voices from a wide range of experiences and vocations to be heard talking about this issue. We hope it will assist people to listen, learn and understand more fully what is asked of us all in response to the abuse crisis.

The research participants and methods

The approach to the main part of the research was qualitative, which means we listened at length to diverse individual experiences relating to clerical child sexual abuse and its aftermath and worked to interpret what these revealed about culture, habits and practices in the life of the Catholic Church here in England and Wales. We carried out eighty-two interviews and four focus group meetings. Those who took part were:

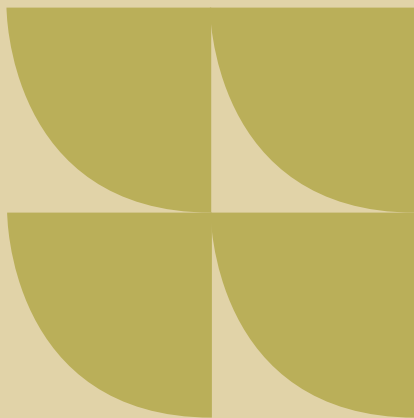
- Twenty-two survivors of abuse by a priest or a person with authority in a Catholic institutional setting.
- Twenty-five priests and deacons, including 3 priests who had been the subject of allegations, two of whom had returned to ministry, and one who remains on a safeguarding plan.³
- Seventeen laypeople, mostly from parishes directly affected by a case of abuse involving a priest they had known, and several young adults with broader experience of the Church. In this group, thirteen were women.
- Two family members of survivors.
- Fourteen professional safeguarding staff, eleven who worked in Catholic institutions and three who worked in secular safeguarding roles.
- Eighteen members of religious communities, ten from male communities, eight from female communities, including some from monastic life. Three of the male religious were brothers, i.e. not ordained; and seven were religious priests.
- Five diocesan bishops.

Some participants fell into more than one category so these figures add up to a greater total than the number of interviews.

The participants in the research were drawn from fourteen of the twenty-two dioceses and sixteen religious orders across England and Wales.

Alongside the interviews, we arranged four focus group meetings in which small groups of laypeople, priests and survivors reflected with us on aspects of their experience in relation to the questions explored in this research. All the interviews and focus group conversations were transcribed and analysed and led to this report.⁴ Our analysis also drew on further background provided in conversations with over twenty individuals deeply concerned with these matters within the Church and from wider society.

Our ethical commitments as academic researchers and our awareness of the sensitivity of this research compelled us to take great care about how we approached participants and the commitments we made to them. We have used strong protocols to protect their identities and ensure



full confidentiality. Although we quote extensively from participants' voices throughout this report because they speak more powerfully than anything we can write, the details given about who is speaking are limited to ensure their anonymity is maintained.

As researchers, we have worked to the high academic standards that are expected. But we are also ourselves part of the Catholic community, part of the systems and cultures the research explores. We have tried to balance both an 'inside' and an 'outside' perspective. We are aware that in both settings, each of us brings experience and convictions that influence how we listen and interpret what we hear. Throughout the project, we have tried to be reflexive, to notice where and how we are biased, and to challenge each other when necessary. One of the purposes this report can serve is to invite others to examine their own attitudes and biases in the light of the many voices and reflections it presents. In other words, the report invites conversation and reflection.

Qualitative research of this kind works with perceptions, narratives and emotions and tries to understand and interpret what these mean. Sometimes we know that individuals' perceptions may be limited or inaccurate. But they are still felt and experienced, and that matters. Perceptions raise questions we need to consider. If perceptions about priestly formation seem to be out of date and unaware of what happens in seminaries today, for example, it indicates a gap in communication that is unhelpful. The question we have continually asked is: what is this telling us about ourselves as a Catholic community of faith?

The primacy of survivors

One of the central themes of the research is the importance of learning from survivors of abuse. We are deeply grateful to the survivors who took part in the research. They spoke with generosity and patience and the immense pain and harm they carried was evident. There is a constant dilemma here. The testimony of survivors, including their anger and frustration, reveals how our culture, habits and practices have failed and points to what we need to re-think. Yet it is not their responsibility to work out what should change or how. Neither can anyone expect that any survivor will always be willing to tell their story of abuse. It can bring fresh pain and renewed trauma each time this is sought, especially for those who were not believed as children or as adults, or experienced responses which lacked compassion or justice.

Every survivor's story is unique and they each reach different places in their lives and in whatever healing or resolution has been possible. Some have long ago distanced themselves from the Catholic Church. Others find a place, often on the edges of faith communities, where they can avoid situations and people that do not feel safe. Some remain active in Catholic belonging. Some have discovered a sense of mission in seeking justice and calling to account the institutions that have failed to acknowledge and respond to the abuse that survivors have experienced.

This research has in part been a process of dialogue with survivors about how to work with them in ways that they feel are safe and worthwhile. The organisation Survivors' Voices has a *Charter for Engaging Survivors*

which is a helpful guide in this area.⁵ We learned from a survivor-activist the principle that the way we work with survivors should look and feel like the opposite of abuse, otherwise there is a risk that instead of supporting survivors, we make things worse.

The research focus: culture, systems and theology

From the beginning, the purpose of the research was to examine whether and how our culture, systems and structures within the Catholic Church are implicated in how clerical child abuse happened and how the response was handled. This question leads directly to aspects of Catholic teaching and theology, so we consider these too in this report. Throughout the research process, we have spent time in theological reflection on what we were hearing.

This report is theological in two different ways. First, there is almost always a theology in the stories people tell and the action they have taken. Whether they describe their abuse by a priest or their experience of trying to disclose what happened, or they are part of a parish or diocese from which a priest has been convicted of abuse, or indeed a leader confronted by aspects of this crisis, their narratives disclose elements of Christian faith even if for some this was later abandoned. Their stories often reveal the gap between who we are called to be as the Church, and how we fall short in practice. They ask questions of the Church as an institution and as a community of faith; that is, they ask questions of us all.

The second way in which the report is theological is in how we engage explicitly with some of the questions raised and bring these into dialogue with Catholic faith and teaching. It is very clear from this research that the abuse crisis brings into focus some areas where we need to consider change in how we understand or practise aspects of Catholic faith. One area, for example, is concerned with attitudes to priesthood and the tendency to place priests on a pedestal and see them as special and holy, rather than sharing the same humanity as everyone else in the community of faith, prone to weakness and failure just as we all are, albeit with a distinctive ministry of leadership and presiding at sacramental celebration. This tendency is implicated in the experience of many victims who felt unable to disclose their abuse or were not believed when they tried to disclose it. It is also implicated in how laypeople feel unable to challenge priests when they have concerns which need to be raised. If relationships between priests and laypeople lack mutual transparency and accountability, and are characterised by silences and fear of scandal, our collective culture becomes dysfunctional. It also fails to reflect fully the dignity of the baptised and our shared responsibility for the life and mission of the Church. This area is explored further in later chapters.

Some of those who spoke to us described the child abuse crisis as a 'catalyst' pointing to what needs to change. In this report we try to indicate some of the areas where there is a need to discover a deeper theological understanding of aspects of Catholic faith and re-think our practices, attitudes and habits accordingly.



Complementary research: a quantitative survey

To enrich the overall picture the research presents, we commissioned a survey to find out more about the attitudes of Catholics who are less directly affected by this issue. Just over 3,000 people responded to a questionnaire. The sample was representative of the demographics of the Catholic population, including both churchgoers and those who do not come to Mass but still identify as Catholics. The survey explores areas such as what people think about how Catholic leaders have handled the abuse crisis and how they see the impact on the reputation of the Church. There is a separate report which presents and discusses the survey findings.

Why this research is needed and what makes it distinctive

This research is focused specifically on the experience of the Catholic community in England and Wales. Our context is different from that of other countries. It is informed by our history, character and culture as well as by the society and politics within which we live. In the last thirty years, wider society in the UK has also had to come to terms with our communal failure to keep children safe in many settings. Legislation has followed, and it has often seemed that both in the Church and in society we are scrambling to keep up, responding to crises rather than pausing for a deeper examination of what needs to change. There is also valid concern that despite many inquiries, reports and reviews, adequate change has not happened or has been too slow. In this context, the purpose of this research is to pause and invite and facilitate deeper reflection and fresh pathways for the Church within its own life and in its social and evangelising mission.

The distinctive feature of this research is the wide range of voices it presents, mostly from within, but also some from beyond, the Catholic community. The picture that emerges is, to use one of Pope Francis' terms, polyhedral.

We look at the reality of the abuse crisis from multiple viewpoints to achieve a 'whole church' perspective in which survivors' voices are particularly significant. This makes for a complex picture; sometimes we listened to opposing versions of situations in which each voice was explaining the truth as they saw and experienced it. This is the reality of an experience such as the child abuse crisis; there is no single story or interpretation which explains everything and we have to puzzle our way forward listening as deeply as we can to as many voices as possible. It was affirming of our approach that as we proceeded, the entire Catholic Church began to explore more deeply what it means to be a synodal Church, one in which mutual listening and discernment are integral to how we live.⁷ We discuss later in the report the connection between the 'conversion of hearts' needed in response to the child abuse crisis and the potential that synodality offers to enable us to become a different kind of church.

This research is also needed because there are aspects of the crisis of child abuse in the Catholic context that differentiate it from other contexts. We have become familiar with revelations of abuse in other contexts in recent



Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*

Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked.⁶

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decades; in the world of football and other areas of sport, for example, and in social care settings for children and young people, and less visibly, in families. There are common themes that link child sexual abuse in Catholic settings to these other contexts: the powerlessness of children and the power of adults; the access to children and young people found in such contexts; and the relative impunity created by inadequate systems of oversight and accountability.

Each of these is implicated in how the abuse crisis has unfolded in Catholic contexts, but with further complex dimensions. The power of priests is spiritual as well as practical and the way in which they have been regarded in the past has been part of the problem. The systems by which priests are assigned to parishes or moved are not transparent nor are there any practical ways in which they are accountable to the parishes they serve. But above all, it cannot be a defence to point to the prevalence of abuse elsewhere as a reason to minimise abuse in the Church because we are called by our faith to a different ethic and practice. The Gospel we profess and try to live demands that we protect anyone who is vulnerable and cherish every child. The moral and social teaching of the Church is founded on the dignity of each person and holds out to the world the imperative to enable every person to flourish and reach fulfilment. It is right that the Church has strong safeguarding practices; society expects this and increasingly requires it of all institutions. But we should do more. We should be a model of better response to victims and survivors than is found elsewhere, and of willingness to confront failures and bring about change.

What this research does not cover

Our concern is with how the whole Catholic community has experienced the child abuse crisis. Our approach asks what the impact has been and what this means for our life of faith and our communal discipleship. We have not tried to investigate any particular cases nor to evaluate in any systematic way how policies and procedures have worked or not worked. There are other bodies in the Church responsible for these tasks: diocesan safeguarding offices and at the national level, the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA) and the Religious Life Safeguarding Service (RLSS). Nor have we tried to evaluate whether the new safeguarding structures and standards recently introduced are effective or working well. That would require a different kind of research, probably at a future time. We have not tabulated facts and figures other than presenting a few snapshots from data found elsewhere to give some context and parameters.

There are also themes in our data that we have not covered in this report, mainly because the data was insufficient for a full analysis and discussion. We also wanted to keep the report to a manageable length. Examples include concerns about Catholic teaching on sexuality and celibacy; about how seminaries work and whether priestly formation should be done in different ways; and about how ideals of the Catholic family were implicated in how abuse happened.

One significant absence in this report is that we have not interviewed offenders, priests who have been convicted of abuse and removed



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from ministry and in some cases, laicised. This is partly due to the difficulty of finding those who might be willing to speak, and partly because such interviewing needs specialised training and skills. But we acknowledge that their voices matter too. We have learned a great deal from the skilled and expert research listening to offenders carried out in Ireland by Dr Marie Keenan and elsewhere by Dr Brendan Geary FMS.

Dr Marie Keenan's research

Dr Marie Keenan is an Irish psychotherapist and academic who has worked with priests who have abused children. In 2011, she published *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture*, (OUP, 2011) a book in which she analysed how and why priests become perpetrators of abuse. Keenan's work is based on in-depth interviews and group work with seven priests and two religious brothers, of whom seven had been convicted of abuse (in the other two other cases, the victims did not wish to press charges), all of whom were taking part in treatment programmes. She examines her subjects' experience and perceptions against a background of wide-ranging theoretical perspectives taking in the culture and systems in which they entered seminaries and what they experienced during formation and subsequent ministry. She situates her research in the context of Catholicism in Ireland and presents a critical review of the response of the Irish Church and of the Pope and the Holy See to the abuse crisis. Her discussion covers themes related to power, sexuality, celibacy and masculinity.

Keenan aimed to discover from the men themselves how they made sense of their lives and what they understood about their sexual abuse of children. She acknowledged that their accounts were subjective, located 'somewhere between objective fact and subjective remembering'. (p.259) She noted too that other parts of the story of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church 'are as yet unlanguageed, much less understood'. (p.259) She concluded: 'When the individual and the institutional dimensions of the problem are brought together what becomes evident is how the individual perpetrators, the bishops and religious leaders, the lower-ranking clergy and the Catholic laity are inter-connected in a web of interacting dynamics and relationships that contributed to the evolution and maintenance of the problem.' (p.260)

Keenan's multi-layered work reinforces a principle that underpins this research, that abuse cannot be explained only by focusing on individual offending behaviour. There are cultural, contextual and systemic factors which also act powerfully and must be included in a full understanding of how priests come to abuse children. Although her work relates primarily to the specific Irish Catholic context, it offers extensive insights to other contexts and has provided a significant reference point for the Boundary Breaking research.

2. The context

The abuse crisis as happening in the past and continuing in the present

When survivors spoke to us, they described the impact of the abuse on their lives and the further impact of how they were treated when they tried to disclose what had happened to them and seek acknowledgement and response. Although for most survivors, the abuse happened many decades ago – sometimes forty or even fifty years ago – the aftermath continues. As the research progressed, we became aware that the aftermath – the failures in how the Church responded to victims and survivors – was as important and revealing as the fact that the original abuse happened. Although much has changed in the Church since their abuse took place, including the introduction and strengthening of safeguarding practices, there is still a great deal more to do. Some of the ways survivors have experienced inadequate or harmful responses from Catholic institutions or office-holders when they have sought acknowledgement and redress have happened in very recent years. Many survivors still lack confidence that the Church as an institution has truly understood all the dimensions of what has failed and the further pain caused by mishandling.

In listening to, and interpreting, the voices of research participants, we have been mindful of the historical past and of the changes and evolutions which have taken place from the 1960s onwards, and more specifically from the mid-1990s when explicit safeguarding policies and practices were introduced in dioceses and parishes here. We also note that Catholic institutions such as dioceses and religious communities and schools have experienced different levels of incidence of clerical abuse and their leaders and professional staff have responded in different ways. It is not possible to generalise very far, and it matters to be aware of timing and of each institutional context.

What matters even more is that we are all part of one body; we cannot behave as though it does not matter if the abuse or mishandling is less prevalent in our own parish, diocese or community when across our broader Catholic community there are multiple cases and unknown numbers of victims and survivors.

The wider context

There are many books and reports that describe and analyse changes in wider social awareness of child abuse in the last 50 years. This report does not review or discuss the wider UK social and policy context, although we acknowledge its influence on how the Catholic Church has become aware of its own failures to prevent abuse or protect children and others who are vulnerable. One useful resource to understand the wider context is a report prepared for the statutory inquiry into child abuse, IICSA, which is available to download.

Jo Lovett, Maddy Coy, and Liz Kelly, Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University, *Deflection, denial and disbelief: social and political discourses about child sexual abuse and their influence on institutional responses: A rapid evidence assessment* (IICSA, 2018).

<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/research/social-political-discourses.html>



Facts and figures about child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in England and Wales

It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the extent of child abuse in the Catholic Church in England and Wales as there has been no comprehensive independent report of the kind that has happened in other countries.⁸

The first national office charged with responsibility for safeguarding policy and practice in the Catholic Church, the Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (COPCA), was set up in 2002. In 2008, following the Cumberlege review, this gave way to a new structure, the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service (CSAS), governed by the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission (NCSC). The Commission published annual reports which provide some data about safeguarding progress and about allegations, but this is limited in scope. The last report was published in 2020, giving more detailed data than previously. No reports have yet been published from the successor agency, the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA). The NCSC reports provide the following overview.

- Between 2001 and 2015, fifty-five priests were laicised as a result of investigations into sexual abuse.⁹
- By 2019, there were 479 safeguarding plans in place, with around ninety to one hundred new plans put in place each year from 2014-2019.¹⁰
- Between 2003 and 2012, 465 allegations of sex abuse had been reported to the statutory civil authorities.
- In its 2018 report covering the previous year, the Commission handled 156 child related allegations against 125 individuals, of which 104 concerned sexual abuse and six concerned child abuse images.¹¹
- In its report on the year 2019, the NCSC recorded that 161 individuals had allegations of abuse against children raised against them, an increase of 29 per cent compared to 2018.¹² Of the alleged perpetrators, half were diocesan or religious priests, brothers or deacons. The majority of allegations related to sexual abuse, grooming or possessing indecent images of children. The other allegations related to emotional, physical and other forms of abuse.

There is no information available about how many of these allegations related to historic cases and how many were related to recent or current experience. Nor is there any data about how many cases resulted in convictions.

A further statistical overview covering a longer period from 1970-2015 was commissioned by CSAS and carried out by Dr Stephen Bullivant.¹³ This review only covered sexual abuse of children under eighteen in contrast to the reports cited above which also covered other forms of abuse. The Bullivant report notes that the data drawn from records held by Catholic institutions is limited and incomplete, but still valuable. His report provides the following summary facts and figures.

- Covering the period from 1970-2015, records exist of 931 separate complaints of child sexual abuse reported to Catholic authorities covering 3,072 instances of alleged abuse. Of these, around 63 per cent were to dioceses and 37 per cent were to religious orders. 1,753 individuals came forward to make complaints.
- The number of complaints made in each year was low (fewer than 20) until 1995, then rose in subsequent years peaking at eighty-four in 2010. The complaints related to incidents said to have occurred an average of 26 years previously.
- The data shows comparatively high levels of alleged abuse in the 1960s and 1970s which are 'broadly consistent' with research evidence from the USA.¹⁴
- In total, 81 per cent of complaints of child sexual abuse received by Catholic institutions were reported to statutory authorities.
- In the same period, there were 177 prosecutions of offenders resulting in 133 convictions.¹⁵

Bullivant and other researchers concur that a large proportion of abuse is never reported to the police or other authorities, and when it is reported, this often happens many years later. Our data and conversations with survivors confirm this pattern. It is highly likely that there are many more cases of abuse where the victims have not disclosed what has happened to them or made allegations to any authorities.

The Church has been learning to respond

The experience of the Catholic Church in relation to clerical child abuse is still unfolding here in England and Wales and in the global Catholic community to which we belong. There have been different phases of this process. At first, as cases of child abuse involving priests became known, often through exposure in the media, the emphasis was on the rapid development of safeguarding policies and procedures. Later, other priorities presented fresh challenges: the need to consider the impact on priests who have not offended but feel that they are under suspicion; coming to terms with how cases had been mishandled by Catholic institutions both in previous decades and still continuing; and the realisation that the Church lacked adequate procedures for investigating bishops who had either offended or had failed to deal adequately with allegations within their jurisdictions, often protecting alleged abusers. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need to work with and learn from survivors, some of whom became active in advocacy on these issues.¹⁶

In England and Wales, it is now thirty years since the Catholic bishops and the wider Catholic community began to realise and recognise the scale and impact of child sexual abuse involving clergy. The steps that have been taken at national and diocesan level in response are far from the whole story, but they indicate continuing efforts to understand the harm and tackle the change needed.

- The first response of the bishops after the crisis became visible in the early 1990s was to develop policies and practices to protect children and vulnerable adults. *Child Abuse: Pastoral and Procedural Guidelines* was published in 1994 by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW). Every diocese was expected to adopt and implement policies to protect children and to appoint diocesan officers to ensure this happened.
- In 1996, the Bishops' Conference published *Healing the Wound of Child Sexual Abuse: A Church Response*, a report from an expert working party which explained the impact of abuse, discussed the factors involved and explored how to provide an effective and compassionate pastoral response.
- In 2000, following a high profile case in which the Archbishop of Westminster's handling of a priest known to be an abuser was criticised, the Archbishop asked Lord Nolan to conduct a review of the policies and structures then in place. This led to the Nolan Report, *A Programme for Action*, which recommended the establishment by the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (COPCA). This was set up in 2002 as an independent agency with professional staff funded by the National Catholic Fund.
- A further review took place in 2007 as recommended by Lord Nolan and chaired by Baroness Cumberlege. The 2007 report, *Safeguarding with Confidence: Keeping Children and Vulnerable Adults Safe in the Catholic Church*, proposed 're-balancing' the role of COPCA and gave it a new name, the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service (CSAS). It also set in place the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission



The One Church approach

The Nolan Report recommended that the whole Church in England and Wales, including individual bishops and religious superiors, should commit themselves to 'a single set of policies, principles and practices' concerning safeguarding. These should be expressed in parish, diocesan and national structures and personnel, and provided with adequate resources. In this understanding, 'One Church' is expressed in unified structures and policies. Later, the Elliott Review added a theological foundation, which is explained below.

(NCSC) to focus on strategy and governance and recommended renewed commitment to the 'One Church' approach and the development of codes of conduct for priests, deacons, religious and others who work in the Church.

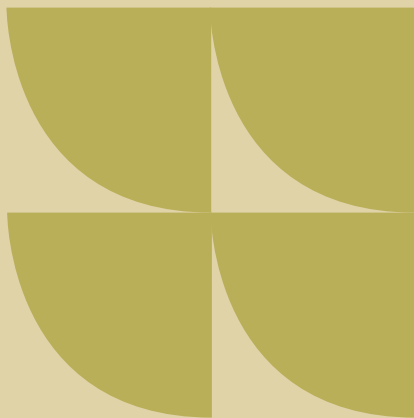
- In 2015, the Conference of Religious of England and Wales published *Integrity in Ministry: A Document of Principles and Standards for Religious in England and Wales*. This is still widely used.¹⁷
- In May 2019, the spring plenary meeting in Valladolid of the Bishops' Conference, their regular in-service training meeting, focused on safeguarding. The training team included members of the CSAS Survivors' Advisory Panel and other survivors of sexual abuse. The purpose of the training was to help the bishops to understand more fully the importance of listening to and accompanying those who have been abused and the long-term effects of abuse.
- The Elliott Review was commissioned in 2019 by the Bishops' Conference to examine again the structures and arrangements for safeguarding in the Catholic Church in England and Wales.¹⁸ This review, which reported in 2020, took place alongside the government's statutory inquiry (IICSA), which is explained below. The Elliott Review recommended further revision of the structures which shape and govern safeguarding policy and practice in the dioceses and communities of male and female religious of England and Wales. It also laid out a theological rationale:

... if we harm the dignity of anyone, and most especially those who have the least power amongst us, we harm the dignity of the Body of Christ itself. In this light, as the People of God, our response to abuses of power, abuses of conscience, or abuses of any kind, should, in the words of Pope Francis, be one of solidarity, a combined and unified response which harnesses the gifts and talents of all parts of the Church, all parts, that is, of the Body of Christ.

This solidarity in safeguarding must involve an active participation of all the members of the People of God, it must involve us acting together - in a meaningful and constructive way - as one Church, as one people in his Body.¹⁹

- The revised national agency recommended by the Elliott Review, the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA) began work in 2021-2022 and acts as a professional standards body with regulatory powers and a fully independent governing body. Alongside the CSSA, a partner agency, the Religious Life Safeguarding Service (RLSS) provides advice, training and support services to religious communities.²⁰
- The Elliott Review also proposed the establishment of a National Tribunal Service (NTS) to address 'canonical matters connected to clergy discipline and canonical offences'.²¹ Launched in November 2023 after approval from the Vatican, it is described as expressing 'the commitment of the Church in England and Wales to promote and encourage consistent and fair practice in the determination of penal cases in accordance with the law of the Church, and so to foster confidence in a just outcome for all those involved'.²²





- In 2020, the Bishops' Conference published *Caring Safely for Others: Pastoral Standards and Safe Conduct in Ministry*, a theologically based code of conduct for those involved in ordained ministry in the Catholic Church in England and Wales.²³
- In 2019, an annual Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse was established. It had first been proposed by a survivor to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM) and was then established by Pope Francis who invited participation from the whole Catholic Church. In England and Wales, a group commissioned by the Bishops' Conference, originally called the Let's Be Honest Group and now known as the Isaiah Journey Group, produces resources to assist parish learning, reflection and prayer on and around the Day of Prayer.²⁴
- A related pattern of development has taken place in the dioceses and religious communities of England and Wales. Dioceses first began to appoint child protection co-ordinators in the 1990s, later revising the role to adopt safeguarding terminology. At first, many were priests but gradually there was a shift to employing professional safeguarding staff with experience in fields such as social work and criminal justice, and setting up diocesan offices. Religious communities initially either established their own safeguarding commissions or participated in a regional body. Later they began to appoint their own professional safeguarding officers or shared resources with each other.
- At parish level, the role of parish safeguarding representative has become well established. These are volunteers who ensure that appropriate Disclosure and Barring Service checks are in place and that safeguarding policies are followed. According to the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission's 2019 report, 96 per cent of 2,181 parishes have a safeguarding representative.²⁵

Whilst all these developments are necessary and have made a difference at every level, they do not in themselves generate the conversion of hearts across the whole Catholic community which Pope Francis calls for. Nor do they probe the habits and practices within the culture of our local Church that need to be changed in the light of what we learn about ourselves from this crisis.

Abuse in the global Catholic Church and the response of the Pope and his offices

A similar process of change has taken place at the level of the Holy See. Successive waves of crisis and scandal relating to child abuse and institutional Catholic denial, cover-up and mishandling have been reported in countries across the world and continue to emerge. These events have asked severe questions of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict and now Pope Francis. Both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have sometimes faltered in response and sometimes acted to recognise the scale of harm and the change that is needed. Both have made statements of heartfelt contrition and sadness. Both have met with and listened to survivors. Pope Francis continues to do this. Steps have been taken

to amend aspects of canon law that categorised child abuse in deeply unhelpful ways. It was offensive to many that abuse was seen in canon law as a crime against chastity. This has now changed to treating child abuse as a crime against human dignity.

In 2019, Pope Francis issued a new Church law titled *Vos estis lux mundi*, which outlines specific processes for investigating and reporting child sexual abuse, including allegations against bishops. It also requires all parts of the Church to follow the laws in their own country in relation to reporting abuse.²⁶ *Vos estis* also explicitly defines clerical sexual abuse and requires local churches to set up easily accessible systems through which anyone can report abuse.

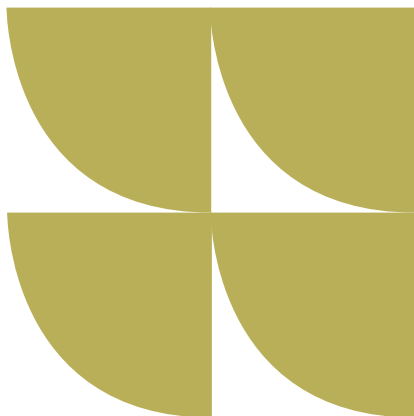
In 2021, Pope Francis issued a revised version of Book VI of the *Code of Canon Law*, the section which deals with sanctions and penalties. The changes specify that sexual abuse, grooming of children for sex, possessing child pornography and failing to report abuse are criminal offences in canon law. They also recognise that adults as well as children can be victims, especially if there is an imbalance of power or a vulnerability. Priests can be dismissed from the clerical state if found guilty of these offences. Canon law also now tells bishops and leaders of religious communities that they ‘must’ rather than ‘can’ punish offenders.

Although these steps are welcome, it is clear from this research as well as from wider commentary and from survivors’ perceptions that there is still much to be done to establish greater confidence in the leadership of the Pope and offices that support his ministry. Although Pope Francis set up the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM) as a body within papal structures through which survivors advised the Pope and Holy See, that body has experienced many difficulties and resignations.²⁷ This research has not explicitly focused on the role of the Holy See, but neither can the context of the Catholic Church England and Wales be separated from what happens there.

The Catholic Church and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)

Wider society in the UK has also experienced a constant stream of revelations about child sexual abuse in multiple institutions and sectors. In response, in 2016 the government set up an independent statutory inquiry known as IICSA. Its task was to investigate where and how institutions such as children’s homes, local authorities and faith-based institutions had failed to protect children in their care. The Inquiry gathered evidence through fifteen investigations which generated nineteen reports. Several of these investigations focused on Catholic institutions, including case studies on Ampleforth, Downside and St Benedict’s Ealing schools and their connected monasteries within the English Benedictine Congregation, and also Birmingham Archdiocese. A report on child protection in the Catholic Church in England and Wales as a whole was published in November 2020, *Safeguarding in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales*.²⁸ This overarching report considered policies, leadership and canon law as well as reviewing whether the Nolan and Cumberlege reviews of child protection had improved policy and practice.





The report was critical of the Catholic Church, finding that it ‘has put its own reputation above the welfare of children for decades’ and ‘repeatedly failed to support victims and survivors, while taking positive action to protect alleged abusers’. The report concluded that

While there have undoubtedly been improvements in the Church’s response to child sexual abuse, based on the evidence we heard, Church leaders need to do more to encourage and embed a culture of safeguarding throughout the entire Catholic Church in England and Wales.²⁹

Its recommendations covered leadership, mandatory training, the need for stronger systems to ensure compliance with safeguarding policy including external auditing, and changes to canon law. The Bishops’ Conference welcomed the reports from the Inquiry and accepted the recommendations made.³⁰

The final section of Chapter Three in this report explores how our research participants experienced the IICSA process and its impact. Overall, it was a mixed experience for the Catholic Church institutionally and for victims and survivors abused within Catholic institutions. For victims and survivors, a number of whom gave evidence, it was a place where they felt listened to, which brought comfort and validation. Crucially, survivors who spoke to this research felt better supported by IICSA than by the Church. Both in the Truth Project, a complementary process to the Inquiry itself in which survivors could tell their stories to trained supportive listeners, and in the formal Inquiry hearings, survivors experienced having a voice that they were denied in the Church.

The experience of the Catholic Church’s internal life being investigated in a statutory inquiry is notable in another way. The institutional Church has always defended its freedom to organise its own life according to its teachings and beliefs. In England and Wales, the history of penal times and anti-Catholicism continuing well into the twentieth century have deepened this defensive tendency. At the same time, in its public voice, the Church has asserted moral and social principles that should guide political choices and policies and has sought to participate in building a good society through practical social action and in its educational institutions. It is uncomfortable for any institution to have its internal systems exposed as having serious failings. It is humbling to submit to external scrutiny that happens because of a failure to live according to the principles espoused in public. This experience has changed the positioning of the Catholic Church in relation to wider society in ways that are still unfolding.

3. About reading this report: Explaining some key terms

Child abuse crisis

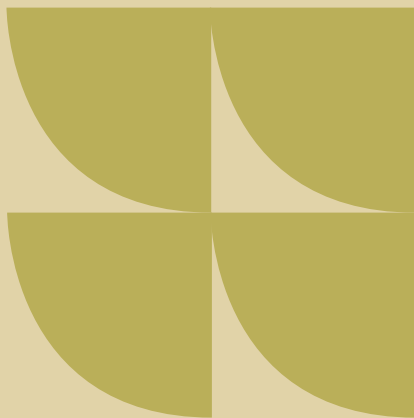
We use the term ‘child abuse crisis’ or ‘abuse crisis’ throughout the report as a shorthand way of referring to a complex and multi-layered reality affecting the whole church, in its institutions and office-holders as well as its communities and individual members. It has disadvantages: ‘crisis’, for example, suggests something short-lived, bounded and exceptional, which is not the case here. Sexual abuse has almost certainly always happened in the Church, but its prevalence has come to light in the last 50 years and challenged fundamental aspects of how we perceive the Church and its ordained ministers. This is an ongoing and profound crisis which asks questions that the Church is still struggling to answer. We understand the crisis as including the sexual abuse which has happened and all the ways in which the Church, in its institutions, leaders and communities, has struggled or failed to respond adequately. This latter dimension includes what we have termed ‘mishandling’, which is explained below.

Victims and survivors

The terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ that we use to refer to and quote those who have experienced abuse are also unsatisfactory in some ways. We do not always know whether individuals feel comfortable with either or both terms. We recognise that those who have experienced abuse may feel that a label has been attached to their voices which ‘others’ them, especially since the text frequently uses ‘we’ to mean the Catholic community (although ‘we’ sometimes means just the research team). Some survivors are still part of the Catholic community; others are not, as a later chapter explores.

Each individual to whom we have listened is far more than a victim or survivor; they have families and friends and professional lives like anyone else. Neither can they be regarded as having a single voice. Rather, each person’s perceptions, experiences and motivations are unique and all have enriched this research. But for ease of reading, some descriptor is necessary. We have avoided the double usage of ‘victim-survivor’ simply for readability. In general, we have used the term ‘survivor’ because most of the report concerns how people experienced what happened after the abuse and how they see their lives and experience now. We have sometimes used the term ‘victim’ when referring to the abuse events. In Chapter Two, there is a section of the report that explores the process of ‘becoming a survivor’ but this is a limited perspective of an area that needs more research.





Mishandling

We use the term ‘mishandling’ to refer to failures or weaknesses in how Catholic Church authorities and institutions responded and continue to respond to those who make disclosures or allegations of abuse. It also applies to how allegations were handled, including how alleged and convicted offenders are treated. So ‘mishandling’ includes:

- covering up abuse by, for example, moving priests to a different parish or school, or to another diocese or even a different country;
- denial that abuse has happened or minimising its impact;
- refusal to believe victims;
- a lack of compassion or of justice in response to victims;
- procedural and administrative mistakes in handling of cases;
- absence or slowness of response;
- a lack of transparency;
- responding only after significant external pressure from the media or other sources.

Mishandling also applies to how parish communities are treated when they are affected by a case either directly or indirectly.

We consider victims’ and survivors’ experience of mishandling in Chapter Two, and parish communities’ experience in Chapter Three. In Chapter Five, we discuss positive responses and experiences and the progress being made to move beyond the kinds of mishandling listed above.

Those who described experiences of mishandling included survivors and also lay people, priests and bishops, safeguarding professionals and religious women and men. Most related to cases of abuse that took place decades ago, but several are still continuing or have come to closure only in the last few years. It is evident that mishandling still continues to happen in the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

The different groups that make up the Church

There are other dilemmas in choosing the best language to talk about the groups that have participated in this research. It is commonplace to talk about ‘laypeople’, but that is a negative definition based on what we are not, that is, not ordained. A positive definition is ‘the baptised’ or ‘the faithful’; but those terms also include the ordained. We have used a variety of terms, including ‘people’ and ‘parish members’ alongside occasional use of the descriptor ‘lay’. Whenever we use the term ‘woman’, we have usually omitted the term ‘lay’, because women in the Catholic Church can only be ‘lay’, that is, they cannot be ordained. Where the women speaking are religious, members of religious communities, the text indicates this.

We have also mostly preferred to use ‘priests’ rather than ‘clergy’, although both terms are commonplace in the Church in this country. ‘Clergy’ is a sociological description, whereas ‘priest’ is a theological term, as are ‘deacon’ and ‘bishop’.³¹ The extensive reliance on the term ‘priest’ in English and Welsh Catholic culture may have disadvantages, as later chapters of this report indicate. Terms such as ‘pastor’ are used elsewhere but are unfamiliar here.

We have also used a range of terms to cover leaders or office-holders, who might include bishops, parish priests, diocesan trustees, provincial or local leaders of religious communities, diocesan staff and those connected with Catholic safeguarding structures including their trustees and professional staff. Some sections of the report are specific in referring to the office-holders concerned. The sections dealing with bishops name them as such, for example. Sometimes the broader and less specific term 'office-holders' or equivalents such as 'leaders' are used, usually in order to protect the anonymity of the person speaking. Some research participants work in, or have worked in, highly specific posts or tasks and we have avoided any risk that they could be identified.

In describing the structures and roles within religious life, we use 'congregation' and 'order' interchangeably to refer to the larger international body to which an individual belongs, and 'monastery' or 'local community' or 'religious community' to refer to the particular units in which people live. We also talk about provincial leaders and local leaders; province size varies and may cover the UK or may include other countries. Sometimes we do not describe whether the leader is male or female in order to protect anonymity. In some religious communities, the leader is termed 'the superior', and that term appears here sometimes in material from the data.

'The Church'

We have reflected frequently during the research about how the term 'the Church' is used. All our participants used this term, although it is often not clear what precise meaning they wish to convey. 'The Church' can mean the institutional structures and office-holders; or it can mean what we have sometimes described in this research as 'the whole Church', the communities of faith and many other groups and individuals with various degrees of belonging and identity as well as the institutional structures and office-holders without which they would not be gathered and visible. This matters because different parts of the Church have experienced the abuse crisis in distinct and specific ways, as this report explains.

Theologically, the Church is both these human and institutional realities and the sacramental presence of Christ in and for the salvation of the world; but it is hard to know whether that what people mean when they use the term. The term is used a great deal in the quotations from the data presented in the report and readers will need to interpret the likely meaning for themselves. We have tried to take some care in using the term in the narrative and analysis. But we recognise that meanings slide and that precise definition each time would make the text wearying to read.



4. ■ We can be better than this

We offer this report to the whole Catholic community, both to those within that community who have been directly affected by the abuse crisis and those who are less directly affected but who listen to the continuing revelations of abuse in Catholic settings and grieve for the victims and survivors and for the wider harm done. We hope people who have not previously found themselves thinking about these issues may read it. And we hope that all those who could be described as office-holders in the Church – priests, deacons, lay ministers, diocesan staff, leaders of religious communities and lay organisations, bishops, trustees – will find it illuminating because of the voices it presents and the portrait it paints of the whole Church.

We also hope survivors will read it and find something of value. Since it examines cultures, systems and theology, it is not a direct response to the concerns many express about their experience. Rather, it is concerned with other processes of change which we believe are needed so that the whole Church understands and learns from what has gone wrong and can find ways forward.

It is not easy to read a report which explores experiences of failure, harm and betrayal in Catholic life. Some readers, particularly among office-holders, will already be weary because there have been so many reports and much other literature on this subject. They have also absorbed multiple requirements at every level for action and response. Some live with uneasy and imperfect situations constrained in various ways that they cannot control.

Although this was difficult research to undertake, it was evident as we reflected on what we have heard that there are restorative and redemptive pathways we can take as a community of faith. There are resources of courage, insight and generosity to be found, and there is potential and willingness to learn, to lament, to be reconciled and to enact justice. The Church will be better if we take these paths.