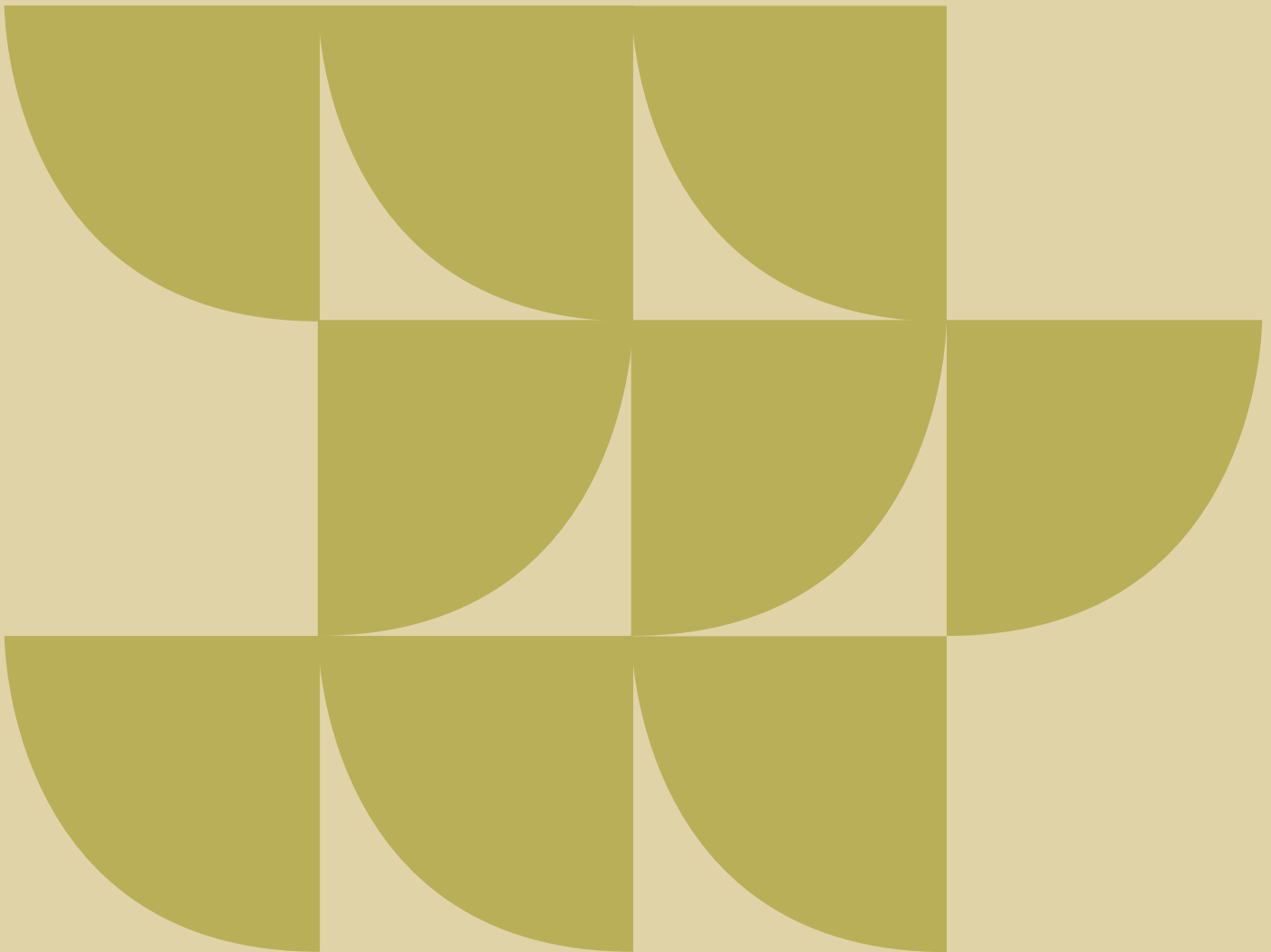




Chapter Three

Listening to the local Church



1. The experience of parish communities and the perspectives of women

In interviews and focus groups, we listened to members of five parishes in different dioceses that were directly affected by a case of abuse or sexual offences by a priest who had worked in their parish. A number of other research participants, including several priests and one deacon, also spoke about how the abuse crisis has affected parishes they knew. We considered a parish to be directly affected if there had been a case of abuse, or an allegation, or an arrest or prosecution for sexual offences, involving a priest who had ministered in that parish. It is important to note that although an allegation may arise in a parish, it may relate to alleged offences that took place in a different parish or other setting and/or at another time. We consider a parish to be indirectly affected when the allegation or case happens elsewhere in their diocese or because they are aware of the scale of the abuse crisis across the global church. It still disturbs people to learn about abuse or mishandling even if they do not know the situation personally.

The impact on parish communities and the way they respond is also influenced by a further factor. It will often happen that the victims are neither known nor visible to the community. This is necessary for legal and ethical reasons, protecting the identity of any victims and ensuring the integrity of any legal process. But it means that parish communities only hear and learn about what has happened from limited perspectives. The voices of victims, the people most affected, are rarely heard, making it more difficult for communities to understand the impact and discover compassion. There are other ways in which parish communities can listen to the experience and voices of victims and survivors, but we found little evidence of their use.

The impact of child abuse cases on parish communities

When confronted by a case in their own parish or a connected school, people describe a range of responses and emotions. These may be experienced as stages in a process, moving through shock and disbelief to grief and compassion or empathetic support for those affected. They are also shaped by individual dispositions and experiences; in most parishes there will be people listening whose lives have been affected by abuse in other settings. A priest described how the news about his predecessor being arrested was received in the parish: *'It was like a bombshell, and people's reactions, I suppose they were hurt a lot.'* A parishioner in the same parish described the shock as being so much worse because of how close the abuse seemed to be to her and her family. A priest who had responsibility for telling a different congregation the news of the arrest of a young priest who had recently served their parish described the response:

It was the last thing they thought I was going to say but as I started to speak to them and tell them, yeah, that stunned and utter silence that it was received by the parishioners, at every single mass.

Listening with Love

Listening with Love is a small group learning programme with seven sessions which invites people to listen to the experience of survivors of abuse and reflect on related passages from scripture. It was prepared by survivors in 2021 and offered to parishes for use in Lent or any other suitable time. The resource was prepared by survivors on the Let's Be Honest group (now known as the Isaiah Journey group), who were commissioned by the Bishops' Conference to do this work. The sessions are straightforward and prayerful; they use recorded conversations with survivors to invite reflection on the impact of abuse. This excellent resource is still available, but there is no data which indicates whether and where it has been used. See [Listening with Love - Catholic Bishops' Conference](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/listening-with-love/) <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/listening-with-love/>

A woman in the same parish described the community's response on hearing that their former priest had been arrested. She described her own reaction:

I remember realising I was crying and sort of wiping a tear away and not wanting to cry. I was next to a young man who has learning difficulties, and as an older woman I would feel protective towards a twenty year old man with learning difficulties and here I was not being in control if you like. And I can't quite tell you why I was crying.

She spoke of the tears of others, including the priests, who stood together meeting people at the end of Mass. This meant that *'when people were coming out, they could talk, they could cry. They (the priests) were there for them'*. It is a striking feature of the responses in this context that there was sympathy and compassion for the current priests serving in a parish where a priest who previously worked there had been arrested and imprisoned. Parish members recognised the impact this would have on other priests.

In other parishes, people spoke of anger and a sense of betrayal. One focus group member commented *'a friend of mine, he was so angry in the end, he walked out and hasn't darkened the doors of the church since'*. Some spoke of how they feel more badly let down by the Church than by other institutions, because they expect higher moral standards:

I felt so angry, I felt so betrayed, I thought how could you, on the one hand, as priests, be talking about spirituality and love and on the other hand there is this dirty secret going on that you have been hiding all the time.

Anger was sometimes directed at the parish priest because he was their most immediate representative of Church institutions, or towards a bishop or other diocesan representative if someone came from the diocese to the affected parish. A research participant who had been responsible for visiting a number of affected parishes spoke about the range of reactions encountered: some feel violated; others feel an intrusive impact on their own relationships; others are accusatory, thinking that someone in the diocese must have known. The parent of a child in a monastery school badly affected by abuse noted the damage that had been done: *'It leaves a wound that needs to be healed.'*

Hearing news of allegations, arrests or convictions often leads to a great deal of self-examination among parish members. People described re-visiting their experiences and encounters with the accused priest, and of questioning their perceptions. They ask themselves did they really not see or know anything, and if they didn't, who did? People spoke of how they lost their trust in priests after learning about allegations and convictions. Priests themselves are painfully aware of this. One spoke of people's hesitation in coming forward for sacraments in a parish after a priest who previously served there had been imprisoned and noted an increase in the number of families wanting to know exactly which priest would be hearing confessions. The validity of the sacraments celebrated by the offender was also questioned: *'Does it still mean, what does that mean because was he really a priest?'* A case of abuse leaves a legacy



I felt so angry, I felt so betrayed, I thought how could you, on the one hand, as priests, be talking about spirituality and love and on the other hand there is this dirty secret going on that you have been hiding all the time.



that affects parish relationships in a lasting way. As one young adult in a focus group said, *'We're still a little bit wary of priests.'*

In one affected parish, there were also expressions of concern and sadness for the offender and for his family. There was recognition that the offender *'must be damaged himself'*, that his life as a priest was over and would never be the same. A few wanted to write to the imprisoned offender. The concern for his family was also striking:

I remember a number of people expressing their concern for [name]'s parents, which again I thought was lovely and beautiful really that people come out and were saying things like, this is dreadful. I can't imagine what his mum must be thinking, and we must pray for her. How's his family, you know, asking genuine questions. Less but still a significant smattering of people very appropriately saying, this is terrible for [name], he's done a terrible thing, but we've got to pray for him as well.

Despite these strong and difficult emotions, most parishioners who spoke to us were clear that their faith was not diminished. Rather, it was strengthened, because their faith is in God, not in the institution of the Church. As one said: *'My faith's bigger than the priests. My faith's very much a relationship with Our Lord.'* For some, faith becomes a resource for coping with what has happened. One woman religious said:

It hasn't affected my relationship with God. If anything, it's brought me to my knees, in a good way, it has inspired me where God has inspired me into reaching out into an area that, when I think about it, is the last thing I want to be doing.

This aspect of people's response illuminates a significant shift in the deep dynamics of Catholic faith. In the past, Catholics might have so closely identified their faith in God with their faith in the Church that these were almost indistinguishable. In the decades since Vatican II, the way in which parish pastoral life has evolved has invited people into a different structure, in which a personal relationship with Christ is central and primary, moving their relationship with the Church into a different space. Desmond Ryan commented on this in his research on Catholic parishes published in 1996: 'What happened at the Council was that the animating germ of community changed from loyalty to faith; a focus on Christ replaced the focus on the Roman Catholic Church.'³⁷ It is encouraging in relation to the questions asked by the abuse crisis that people can draw directly on their faith in Christ in order to respond.

Mishandling of the impact on parish communities

The way in which diocesan authorities handle telling parishes what has happened when there is an allegation or an arrest related to a priest they have known matters very much. Many people are affected, as described above. As this research proceeded, we became aware that what we term 'mishandling' also refers to whole parishes and other Catholic communities. Mishandling of communities happens through some of the same habits that describe how victims and survivors are failed: poor communication; a lack of transparency; a failure to realise what parish communities need; and an absence of pastoral care.



It hasn't affected my relationship with God. If anything, it's brought me to my knees, in a good way, it has inspired me where God has inspired me into reaching out into an area that, when I think about it, is the last thing I want to be doing.





When parish members told us how they found out about allegations against a priest in their parish or diocese, many described limited or unhelpful communication, notably from diocesan authorities. One parishioner found out through the national press that her parish priest had been accused of sexually abusing at least one child in the parish. She explained that no one from the diocese came to meet with the parishioners to explain what had happened:

It would have been good to have somebody to come and explain to the parishes that had been sort of damaged, you know, what had gone on. But it was what you'd come to expect, that you're not really told anything, and you'll find out when and if you need to.

Where efforts have been made by the diocese or parish priest to share the news with the parish, it has often not been done well, which can give the impression that the community's knowledge and the impact on them was not considered important. In another example, a member of a parish associated with a monastery badly affected by allegations spoke of himself

as the person sitting in the pew, and I see all this going on in the headlines, you know, like, pervert priest did X, Y, Z, and I'm here as a reasonably educated person, thinking, you know, like what the [hell's] going on, sorry again, why isn't the Church telling me what it's done, what it's doing, you know.

Some parish members described the sudden disappearance of their priest and lack of any explanation until later. *'He was there one minute, then he was gone'*, one parish member said. This is a difficult area as information relating to an allegation or an arrest often cannot be shared fully, particularly once a legal process is underway or when the police are already involved. But the reasons why information cannot be disclosed are also rarely explained well and people can be left feeling overlooked. The further difficulty is that attempts to explain a sudden departure may in practice convey more information than is fair to the person accused. But no explanation is unfair to the parish community and has other consequences. One parishioner in a northern diocese described the shock of the sudden removal of a priest from the parish, creating a void which was then filled with rumours and speculation. In this case, the lack of information about the actual allegations, the fact that the investigations took several years, and the absence of support from the diocese, all contributed to the parishioners' inability to believe the allegations, even when he was convicted and sentenced to prison.

Sometimes communication with priests may be good but communities are still left out of communication. A priest who found out that his predecessor had abused several children in his parish describes personally receiving helpful guidance and visits from the diocesan safeguarding officer. But no-one from the diocese came to speak to the parish for some time afterwards, and this left scars on both the priest and the parishioners.

Breaking and explaining news to affected parishes about priests who have abused can be fraught with difficulties. In the parish just cited where a previous incumbent had abused children, the community only found out after the accused priest had died. The priest and parish

leaders present at the time described the efforts that went into planning how to handle the reactions from the community, including setting up a series of meetings so that all were given the chance to talk about how the news was affecting them. One unexpected impact of this open process was that other victims came forward, wanting acknowledgment and an apology. These situations are very delicate and demanding; no one can predict how this kind of information will affect people, and many priests and pastoral teams may feel they don't have the skills to manage such a situation.

One diocesan trustee told us how the diocese had handled communications in the wake of having had two priests convicted of sexual offences. Diocesan staff and senior clergy visited affected parishes:

The safeguarding coordinator did go and the bishop and one or two members of the clergy also went, and I think, I know they were quite apprehensive about this, because they faced, in some places, very angry parishioners who rightly felt angry and they have felt betrayed and deceived but what else could the bishop do? They, the bishop and the safeguarding coordinator, did visit the parishes to at least present a face or faces to the parishioners, those that wanted to take part in these meetings, and try to undertake some sort of healing.

Pastoral care when parishes are affected

A member of the clergy in a diocese where an accused priest committed suicide recognised the emotions stirred up: *'It's valid, it's how people are reacting. Shock, disbelief, anger, anger at how the diocese behaved or is behaving, anger at what's going on.'* He saw the need to let these emotions *'run their course'*, letting investigations happen and pausing in prayer for all concerned. He also pondered whether and how they might have enabled parishioners to process the impact of this news, saying:

We've not opened up the discussion to, well actually, how is it affecting you? We just don't know, but there's a flip side that, why would we want to do that, what would be the benefit of it? There are loads of questions around that.

Nonetheless, he said, *'I just need to be there, to listen to people, if they need to speak.'*

It is difficult to know what is best practice in parishes that are indirectly affected, whether to speak of the case to the whole parish community or to wait and listen. Sunday Mass congregations gather families and people of all ages, and each Mass may have many other elements happening. How far is it a suitable setting in which to speak openly about such matters, particularly when facts are few? Yet if it is not spoken about, people get their information from local and social media and other sources and trust in 'the Church' or in the ordained ministries falters. Even when information is available in public, it still matters that there is some communication in the parish that acknowledges what has happened.



If a parish community is to grow and take responsibility for its own life, and even more if it is to move into the experience of becoming a synodal church, it needs to face the parts of Catholic life that are difficult.³⁸





In the contemporary Catholic Church, a lot is expected of parish communities. The vision of a strong parish community held out in recent Catholic teaching includes an expectation of active leadership from the baptised, extensive involvement in ministries, capacities to absorb parishes being merged and the challenge of sustaining parish life with fewer priests available for ministry. If a parish community is to grow and take responsibility for its own life, and even more if it is to move into the experience of becoming a synodal church, it needs to face the parts of Catholic life that are difficult.³⁸ It also needs to be able to trust diocesan authorities and agencies and other leaders. There is a task here which extends beyond the reach of safeguarding policy and standards, a need to explore and model good practice in how to help parishes to process awareness of the abuse crisis, most of all when they have been directly affected but also when indirectly affected. We explore this further in later chapters.

Women's voices

A majority of those active in parishes are women. But as many research participants pointed out, the Catholic Church is still male dominated structurally and there is little institutional space for women's voices. Among our eighty-two interviewees and twenty-five focus group members, forty-three were women. They included survivors, religious, safeguarding staff, women in professional roles in Catholic organisations and institutions and women who were active in their own parish or in diocesan activities. The voices of the latter group, roughly a third of the total, offer further perspectives on how the abuse crisis has impacted on the life of the local church. The striking element is how their reflection on the questions raised by the abuse crisis led directly into a critical awareness of the habits and practices of clericalism, a theme considered in detail in the next two chapters. The voices of this latter group of women are presented here.

Clericalism impacts on women in ways that are different to men. Most of the women who spoke to us had a good grounding in theology, gained either through independent study or through formation programmes. They struggled with their awareness that their participation in Church life is often dependant on and conditioned by priests. Several had found that their education and confidence had often been challenging or even threatening to priests. As one woman said, *'I can see that I may come across as a threat because I'm a woman, who has read, who has a mind of her own, who has, you know, thoughts about what kind of church we should be'*. Some had also noticed priests who were not comfortable working with women: *'I don't know if they know how to mix with women. And it's not only about mixing with them, it's accepting them and realising that we have a voice.'*

They gave examples of habits and practices that communicated their status in church life. An older woman spoke of how it felt diminishing to call very young priests 'Father'. Another spoke of how priests controlled what could be put in the parish newsletter and how the newsletter frequently used phrases like 'the priests have decided...'. Several found the culture of needing permission frustrating. They expressed strong

views about the lack of consultation with active parish members on issues ranging from the new lectionary and missal to how changing how sacramental programmes are run by abandoning a family-based approach to catechesis. One woman observed that whilst she hears priests promoting synodality when they preach, it does not seem to occur to them to consult with parishioners or set up parish councils. A woman in another diocese described how the priest in her parish showed no interest in what women thought, even though they form the majority of parish members. He saw no need to consult when changing things in the parish:

The strap line for the mission statement has been changed, the Mass times have been changed, without any consultation with anyone... the lack of understanding that actually I need to talk to someone about this before I do it, so in my mind, whilst ever there's that kind of structure in the church, we've got difficulties.

This is perhaps felt most keenly when a new priest is appointed to a parish. Several women noted that parishioners have no role in selecting a new priest for their parish. A former religious sister noted that parishes cannot interview priests *'finding out what their spirituality and theology was about and does it fit in with our community and are you the best person for this role.'* Neither, she observes, does the system tackle 'ineffectual' clergy or those who do damage in the parish.

Two-thirds of the women had been in parishes characterised by good collaborative working relationships between the priest and the people, until a new priest arrived, when this was replaced by *'It's "my way or the highway"'*. The mother of children abused by their parish priest talked about how an individual priest's style can affect a parish, sometimes changing the whole nature and feel of a parish, almost overnight: *'And people feeling that there was nothing they could do about it, nothing at all...they had to accept it'*. She added that the reversal of previous good practice is 'destroying' and results in many choosing to leave. A woman who had a professional background in education said of their new priest *'he feels it's his job to change us and bring us back in line'*.

The women spoke of their desire to see more collaborative ministry in their parishes, which they believe often fails because of clerical attitudes and narrow understanding of what hierarchical structures are meant to be. They experience hierarchy as a structure by which power is exercised over people, rather than as a structure for ordering and unifying relationships and gifts, a service to communion. One woman argued that greater collaborative ministry could bring about *'a renewed understanding of hierarchy or at least recover an emphasis in the meaning of hierarchy which is often neglected'*. She explained this further: *'Hierarchy is what holds communion together, rather like the membranes in a leaf, it's part of what the Spirit gives to enable the Church to be maintained in truth and unity.'*

The paradox here is the strength of their faith, which often remains unaffected by the awareness of the extent of child sexual abuse cases and is combined with a searching analysis of the institutional Church. One woman was only too aware of the way in which she has,



Hierarchy is what holds communion together, rather like the membranes in a leaf, it's part of what the Spirit gives to enable the Church to be maintained in truth and unity.





We're the body of Christ and if one part of that body is injured or is broken, we're all broken a bit and injured a bit.



even unwittingly, colluded with clericalism: *'It's not just about clergy; it's about what we, as people, expect of our priests as well.'* She noted that women can be drawn into tending to the needs of priests, into seeing them as helpless, and even to be pleased that 'father' asks things of them. Another woman who shared this awareness commented: *'I can see that I should be different, sometimes it's easy to slip in to the role of baking a cake for the priest or you know, looking after... as a person...I need to reflect on how I am with the priests in that way.'*

The women had careful insight into the reality of child sexual abuse in the Church and how it has shown the need for far-reaching change. One described it as a 'wake-up call' to the church to recognise and accept the radical changes that are called for. Another woman in the same parish said *'We're the body of Christ and if one part of that body is injured or is broken, we're all broken a bit and injured a bit.'* They believed that only deep transformation may begin to heal these wounds. A mother and justice and peace worker said: *'For me personally, healing would look like, we're really going to change structures, and systems and processes. We're really going to commit to a kind of formation that enables a parish community to feel it shares responsibility.'* They know that, despite all the reports published and inquiries conducted, change will still need to be systemic, and that it will not be easy. The need for the priesthood to be *'changed, transformed, redeemed, whatever'* will not happen with a bit of counselling or pastoral accompaniment. A woman with professional experience of management saw that this change needs to be led from the top. Her concern was that there is a lack of leadership that can transform; individual bishops might be *'quite visionary'* in their souls but *'the system stamps it out of you.'* So the Church need bishops *'who won't be stamped out, who won't be smothered, who won't be killed by the system'.*

Young women in the Church

We also listened to several younger women who spoke of the radical complexity of belonging to the Church at this time and the burden they carry from knowing about clerical child sexual abuse in the Church. Their experiences were similar to those of the older women. Two spoke about meeting younger priests who they felt were uncomfortable with them, perhaps because they are young and female. They are keenly aware of their tendency still to accept priests being set upon a pedestal but they saw the complexity here: *'The Church and priests still occupy this hypocritical position where they are derided and heralded, you know, there's a real sense of shame around being a priest, and at the same time, well, they're God's servants on Earth.'*

The younger women's voices were distinct in their awareness of how unusual and almost liminal it is to be Catholic in our highly secularised society. They spoke of how their Catholic belonging has to be further justified in the light of the shame caused by public awareness of clerical sexual abuse. One young woman said:

The way that, like when I am viewed by even members of my family or my friends, in what kind of is or isn't said about the fact that you belonging to this group, makes you either complicit or tacitly kind of like okay with the fact that that happened and is still happening and are they, you must be a bad person or, at the very least, like a morally questionable person.

Another participant described how her best friend, *'an ardent atheist'* quizzed her on how she could stay in the Church:

She said, all joking aside, if my dad had done this, I couldn't see him again and if my brother had done this, I couldn't see him again. If my best friend had done it, I couldn't see them again. Why are you still in it?

Their words express defensiveness, some elements of guilt and of being torn, but not certainty or pride or security or hope. This final quote from one of the younger women expresses the disappointment and frustration but the dream of potential:

What keeps coming to mind is that I feel like there's two kinds of Catholic Church. One's sort of like a corporate institution, and one's a spiritual community and it feels really disjointed at the moment... just the way in which things get run, whether that's in the youth service or in a charity or whatever, it feels like sometimes the worst of the corporate world and maybe the worst of the spiritual world, are sometimes put together, when the Church could actually be a place where the best of the corporate world and the best of the spiritual world could join forces and be a force for good.

In analysing the data, we looked for material in which research participants commented on the role of women in relation to the abuse crisis. There was some data in which people commented on the unequal status of women in a male-dominated Church but the theme which emerged most often was a sense that women's perspectives are needed for a healthy Church, and that there are too many levels of authority and decision-making in which their voices are not heard. We realised that the significant element in this research was not what participants said about women; there was often a weariness in these comments, a sense of having said these things many times to little effect. Rather, it was the distinctive perceptions in the voices of the women who took part in the research. They spoke with far reaching insight, clarity and compassion about the dimensions of the abuse crisis and its impact. They are also parish members, survivors, family members of survivors, members of religious communities and professional safeguarding staff, and we have not separated out their voices in the relevant chapters. But the significant conclusion here echoes what has been heard in listening processes across the whole Catholic Church in recent years; the voices of women need to be invited and heard at every level of the Church. This is all the more important if the Church is to find pathways of conversion and action in response to the abuse crisis.





2. The voice of the child

One of the limits of this research is that we could not listen directly to the voices of children who have been abused in Church settings, speaking as children. The survivors who spoke to us were adults recalling what had happened to them in childhood or in teenage years. Their actual experiences are embedded in their traumatised memories and psyches, conditioned by the attitudes of the Church and society towards children at the time when their abuse took place. As already noted, it is established in wider studies that child abuse often only comes to light in later years. Victims may take decades before they disclose what has happened.

There were some glimpses of how earlier social and ecclesial attitudes to children affected victims in the reflections of adult survivors and others who spoke in this research. One man recalled earlier social attitudes: *'A child should be seen and not heard and that was endemic across the whole of society, not just within the Church.'* Children were often viewed in negative terms. A female religious, a former teacher, said that when she was training to be a teacher, some sixty years ago, *'Children were "wicked", in inverted commas, children needed to be punished, children told lies. This was the general sort of atmosphere everywhere.'* In the Church, as in society, children's accounts, if they risked speaking, of how they were feeling, what they thought, or what had happened to them were often not believed.

Participants described examples of this happening in Catholic life. A woman who was educated by sisters and whose health was badly damaged by the failure of those sisters to believe her when she fell and knew she had broken a bone: *'They kept telling me, I was the one that was wrong.'* Another survivor who is now a teacher spoke about the lack of respect for children that she has witnessed in the Church and the mistaken belief that children are able to get over and recover from anything:

Well, the way they've treated children, this idea that nothing affects children has been such a warped view, that children are resilient and get through things, but also that children take on the sins of the fathers and the mother. It's been absolutely ridiculous and that has gone on for years into the seventies, and into the eighties ... I think it's been a complete lack of respect for children and their needs, it's been the same within Catholic education.... but it's not just the Catholic Church, it's society as a whole.

The attitude of not taking children seriously enabled some Catholic authority figures to trivialise their experiences. A priest who is now on a safeguarding plan talked about how, historically, 'everyone' in his community played around with boys, touching their bottoms, for example. He claimed that everyone knew but that *'I wouldn't say it was acceptable.'* He didn't condone it, but also did not condemn it outright. A priest reported speaking to another priest about a child who had been raped by a different priest: *'What did you do about the child who was raped by the priest? Instant answer, I never thought about it again. What? Excuse me, where's your humanity?'*

There were also reflections in the data of how perceptions of the child in contemporary culture have changed so that a child is now seen as a person with agency, whose experience should be taken seriously. A parish priest told us *'we have to accept children, the dignity of the child and maybe that was part of the problem. The child's experience of life may be limited but it's a real experience.'* The earlier comment by a female religious now retired from teaching highlights seeing the child not as the passive recipient of learning but as able to 'teach' the religious who often were not specifically trained to work with children:

What I think I've found in many ways is that, for religious who are running, if you like, a rather elitist enclosed organisation like an independent school, working with the children and being involved with lay teachers, in many ways, helped the religious to mature, in a way that their own religious training had not done.

Although absent from our research in any direct form, the voices of abused children are present in the voices of the survivors who have spoken. They are heard when some survivors recognise their own 'inner child', and when they express concern for the safety and protection of other children. A female survivor reminds us that when we are dealing with adult survivors of childhood abuse, *'it has allowed the child to come out'*. Another survivor reflected that as he gets older: *'I realise there's always a small boy in us somewhere, you know, still feels that there's nothing we can do but what we do is dodge the bullet every so often and just get on with our lives.'* This indicates an important element of any listening to survivors, the need to understand that it may be the 'small boy' who is speaking, not the adult whom we see.

Survivors described becoming aware of the desire to protect other children becoming stronger and easier to articulate after they had accepted the fact of their own abuse. A female survivor remembers this point in her own journey: *'The penny dropped, well it dropped in stages, but I was actually on holidays, walking across a beach and the penny dropped in the middle of this vast beach, if he did it to me, did he do it to anybody else?'* For some who spoke to us, this led to a sense of guilt for not having reported their abuse at an earlier age, especially after discovering that their abuser then went on to abuse others. A religious sister, a survivor of clerical abuse said: *'Actually I felt a bit guilty because I thought, gosh, maybe if I'd come forward earlier, he wouldn't have retired back to Ireland and then started abusing children over there.'* Survivors who have become activists have said they have been driven to this partly to seek justice but partly to ensure that what they experienced is never repeated. One of these spoke about his feelings towards the religious order where his abuse occurred:

I've no wish to hurt them. I want them to tell me that they are doing something for the future, and they're doing something to protect children...I do not want any child to go through the three years that I went through. I do not want any child to do that, who felt hounded, lost and didn't know where to go and alone and couldn't tell their parents and living away from [home], and it just, it horrifies me.

A survivor of abuse in a monastery boarding school is writing a book about his experiences, with the hope of saving *'a few young people from being interfered with...well then, you know, I'll have done something.'* Another survivor added *'I permanently worry about children'*, asking how we can guarantee their security and protect them from the worst excesses of people.



Recognising the rights of children as paramount

Attitudes in society changed with the growth of child psychology, which framed the child as an individual person in her/his own right. The 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of Child was a significant milestone, asserting and establishing the child as an individual with agency and rights. In England and Wales, a parallel milestone was the Children Act of 1989, setting out a legislative framework for a child protection system based on the paramouncy principle in which the child's best interests should be the paramount consideration in any legal matters. The Catholic Church in England and Wales followed soon afterwards, making a commitment to the paramouncy principle in 1994 in the first set of policies for safeguarding children, *Child Abuse: Pastoral and Procedural Guidelines*.³⁹



3. The experience of priests

The voices of priests describing the impact of the abuse crisis on their lives and ministry are heard less frequently in this crisis. Priests are often framed as those who bear responsibility, yet many also feel harmed by what has happened. Their experience and their perspectives are important in building a full understanding of the pain and trauma in the Church. They also play crucial roles in the conversion and transformation that the abuse crisis asks of the whole community of faith. In interviews and a focus group, we listened to seventeen diocesan priests, seven priests who are members of religious orders and one permanent deacon⁴⁰. The diocesan priests came from nine dioceses in England and Wales. One of the religious priests also worked in a parish setting. Two priests had been the subject of an allegation and investigations and had returned to ministry. One religious priest was living under a safeguarding plan. At least two were also survivors of abuse.

This section also includes observations from diocesan safeguarding staff who recognise how the abuse crisis has affected priests and changed their ministry.

The impact on priests

The psychological impact of abuse cases on priests was commented on repeatedly, by priests themselves and also by parish members, members of religious communities, diocesan staff and others. Learning about specific incidents of abuse in parishes they have served or in their dioceses as well as knowledge of cases of abuse across the global Catholic Church affects the emotional, psychological and physical health of clergy. The impact is cumulative as successive waves of allegations and prosecutions emerge. Priests feel shame and some expectation that they must carry some of the blame for the actions of others. They also feel the burden of absorbing the anger and sense of betrayal felt in parish communities when a current case or a historic case erupts. They are expected to handle communication and the aftermath, often with little guidance and sometimes with limited information. Those who have experienced the arrest of a close colleague are even more deeply affected.

For some priests, this has altered how they feel about the Church itself and has impacted their morale. We heard from or of several priests who express the desire to give up their ministry and from any role in the Church. Some look forward to retirement or think of retiring early. One priest said, *'it's not nice now'*. He admitted to being ashamed, not just of the Church but at being a Catholic: *'I look with horror and sadness, beyond imagining.'* As well as the fear and vulnerability, there is also a weariness and a real desire to move on, but each new allegation drags people down again:

I do think it's something that we try to live with and when another case happens, we think, oh gosh, this is going to push us right back into that kind of image that people have of us, which has just, it means that we don't have a clean portfolio at all.

Several priests spoke of the support they had received from family and friends, but also the warmth and friendship of their parishioners, which helped them cope with the impact of a fellow priest's offending. Whilst they expected some hostility from their parishioners, they experienced the opposite:

My overarching concern was, will the people be able to trust their priests, having my immediate predecessor being charged with such horrendous actions. But I was humbled and overwhelmed really at the warmth and the generosity with which the people enveloped me and they were more concerned about how I was coping with the situation at hand than the situation itself and to this day, that has probably been the most humbling experience of my priestly life, a completely undeserved generosity of the people in times of great challenge.

There were fewer examples of support received from diocesan office-holders or staff. In one valuable exception, a diocesan bishop brought together the priests and deacons who had been affected by a case, to meet and spend some time together, reflecting on their response and feelings. This was described as being positive and helpful.

The impact on pastoral ministry

The combined psychological and emotional effects of having to be so cautious and feeling hemmed in by policies and procedures have led to an impoverishment of ministry and pastoral engagement. A heightened awareness of their own vulnerability and the need to safeguard themselves has caused priests to adapt aspects of their ministry, particularly with regard to children. A recently ordained priest reflected:

I've seen too many priests freeze when a child goes to hug them, and that's coloured that relationship for ever thereafter because the child will perceive the priest as someone who's uncomfortable in their presence.

This is painful; one priest observed that it is not possible to carry out pastoral ministry effectively without attaching oneself to people, to really engage with them, and in this area, getting the boundaries right is always challenging. A priest involved in the ministry of safeguarding feels pessimistic when faced with this conundrum: *'The whole thing has affected our whole priesthood...how we interact with people.'* One parish priest remembered how it was when he was a younger priest, in and out of family homes, playing football with the boys and reflects *'you wouldn't do that now...if there's not an adult about.'*

There is a further impact on pastoral ministry from public perceptions of Catholic clergy. Priests know that allegations against other priests affect how all clergy and male religious are perceived in the Church and by society more widely. Jokes about 'paedophile priests' are now common in all media and any example is universalised across other churches. Many films and documentaries have featured clerical abuse



as a theme and survivors have published memoirs. Many of these are valuable testimonies, including those that are rightly critical, but they still contribute to a perception of all priests that is unfair to the majority who have not abused.

Knowing that many people now primarily view priests in suspicious terms can be very difficult to manage or respond to. A couple of those who spoke to us reported having children shout 'paedophile' at them. In one disturbing incident, a priest who was not informed by his bishop that his predecessor had been arrested visited a local school and came out with spittle on his back. A safeguarding officer observed that some priests in the diocese preferred not to wear the clerical collar to avoid being recognised as a priest. The provincial leader of a religious order reported that some colleagues had been falsely accused simply because they are members of the same order or taught at the same school where other men had been accused. He added that this climate and experience can work against community members accepting the necessity of safeguarding and expressing concern for victims.

The vulnerability of priests and the fear of false allegations

Priests fear being the subject of an allegation, especially where they may not be informed about the specific allegation or where the investigation process which takes place is open-ended and unpredictable. Several participants referred to fellow priests being asked to stand down from ministry with little understanding of the nature of the allegation being made against them or of what would happen to them, leaving them feeling isolated and abandoned. Safeguarding officers see and hear this anxiety at close quarters. A member of diocesan safeguarding staff described how the first three hours of a five-hour safeguarding training session were taken up with priests saying how vulnerable they felt. She gave examples of their fears: *'I'm going to get a knock on the door in the middle of the night'; 'I'm going to be moved somewhere, and I'm not going to know what's going to happen for years.'* The threat of sudden removal from ministry, referred to as 'being kidnapped' or being 'helicoptered out', is seen as particularly traumatising as when this happens, the accused person loses any sense of agency over their own life.

Another safeguarding professional believed that priests fear safeguarding policies because they feel there is no real safety for them. The diocesan safeguarding officer quoted above described priests talking anxiously about

how there was no one there to protect them, the bishops don't protect them, their bishop would not protect them; they haven't got the money to appoint legal representation if they are in that situation, and... they'll be hung out to dry.

She commented that the lack of leadership from bishops made priests feel more vulnerable and exposed. This is complex however. When a bishop does show leadership in one area, making a public apology for example, it can increase priests' anxiety. Referring to an apology given at IICSA, she said, *'Clergy felt they were being let down by that apology because they felt that they would be, they were being tarred with the same brush, if you like, as offenders.'*

This fear of being falsely accused of abuse is often based on what has happened to fellow priests, and sometimes on stories that may or may not be accurately reported, raising the question as to whether this is a grounded fear or a perceived but unlikely one. A diocesan safeguarding professional said that false allegations are rare, but that they do exist. She and her colleagues try to reassure priests during safeguarding training that if they follow best practice, they will be less vulnerable. She acknowledged however, that this is often met with scepticism. The impact of having had a false allegation made against you is significant and can be life-changing, as recognised by all who have been close to such a situation. A retired parish priest used the image of a sword of Damocles hanging over the head of clergy, threatening a lasting impact that cannot be undone.

We listened to three priests who were the subject of allegations and investigations. In two cases, the police decided there was no case for further action. One returned to ministry after an assessment commissioned by his diocese, and the other moved to a different diocese after investigations showed the allegation to be false. The third priest was living separately from his religious community under a safeguarding plan. Despite the particularity of each case, there were some common elements to their experiences.

The first of these was the perceived lack of clarity or transparency of the procedures for dealing with their case. The older of the two priests returned to ministry reported that after he was asked to withdraw from ministry, he was never sure who was responsible for him, for keeping him informed, nor what other priests and his parishioners would be told and by whom. When the police found no case to answer, the Local Area Designated Officer (LADO) insisted that his diocese should carry out an investigation even though at that stage the diocese was unaware of the exact nature of the allegation against him. He was then required to do a full psychological and risk assessment and subsequently returned to parish ministry. He recalled how this happened in a meeting with his bishop:

He said, you're free to return to ministry and I said, am I? I said, is this the end? He said, yes, yes, it is. I said, well, how would I know that, because there's no set of procedures about things that's written down, about what I have to go through, and who makes decisions about me and what happens?

In this case, the priest also became aware that his bishop had failed to maintain confidentiality, telling other priests and people from his former parish about his case even when the bishop had no knowledge of the actual allegation. This led to rumours and gossip about the priest and was a lonely and isolating experience.

The second element is how the priests in this situation lamented the lack of care and concern from their diocesan authorities and agencies. The second accused priest, who was younger and from a religious community, reported not receiving any pastoral care or visits from office-holders in the diocese in which he worked. He felt *'unsupported and even unwanted'* by the diocese, a feeling shared by the older priest: *'We don't expect it from the diocese because it's not there and, as I've said, from day one of ordination, X years ago, you kind of knew that and nothing's*





changed'. This suggests that the trust necessary to work through these very difficult situations had already either been lost, or not established in the first place. A bishop affirmed this:

The priests themselves, even when they've voluntarily stood down from the ministry, can feel badly let down by the Church that they've tried to serve all their life, and feel that things are weighted in favour of people who make an allegation and less in terms of the process of justice.

A parish priest described accompanying a priest who was accused but where the case was never proven. The accused priest was told by the diocese to pack his bags and leave the presbytery. He was given a house but put on an open-ended safeguarding plan. This resulted in his feeling completely unsupported and ultimately more vulnerable.

When asked what kind of support would have made most difference, whether he needed friendship, pastoral care or clarity about procedures, the older accused but exonerated priest responded that most of all he needed clarity about the situation and what was going to happen next. This leads to the third common element, how the psychological and emotional impact of the experience of being accused led to a great sense of shame and loss of confidence. The younger accused priest described how he felt when he was 'cleared' by an internal investigation and allowed to return to ministry: *'I felt really that I was no longer a priest because I find myself a kind of immoral person who is trying to moralise people in the church, with homilies, I was ashamed of my own person'*.

The older priest who found himself in this situation describes the long-lasting physical effects of the shock of being accused: *'I went into shock, I couldn't possibly comprehend what was happening, what I was going through, so you just try and take it day by day and deal with yourself.'* He describes suffering from 'brain fog' and a collapse in his self-confidence. The younger priest reported being left feeling too anxious to go out, feeling safer alone and in the comfort of his own room. He now tries to avoid all contact with young people and children. He saw this reflected in others, when lay people asked why his order were increasingly withdrawing from youth and children's ministry, because they feel it to be high risk. His instincts as to when and where he feels safe in ministry have been dramatically redrawn.

The situation for priests in this 'grey area' is particularly difficult. Priests in a focus group felt that such priests are never fully exonerated. One said:

I have some sympathy with the bishops because people are never exonerated, if you send a guy for psychological assessment, the report never says, 'this guy's fine, he's no risk'. The best it ever says is, it's a low risk.

He described a current case which cannot go to court because some

vital evidence has been withdrawn, where the bishop had to tell the priest he could not allow him back into parish ministry because there was still an element of doubt in connection with the case. Even when returned to ministry, the experience and even the concept of exoneration casts a shadow. One of the priests accused and returned to ministry that spoke to us rejected the use of the word 'exonerated', as he says he did nothing to be exonerated from.

Priests and safeguarding: progress and resistance

The development and implementation of safeguarding policy and practices over the last 30 years has also had a significant impact on the pastoral ministry of priests. It is clear from many who spoke to us that major progress has been made in the design and provision of safeguarding training for all ordained ministers and religious over the last ten years in particular. The provincial leader of a men's religious order noted that novices are now more aware of what it means to safeguard all and each other, and also of the complexities this is likely to entail. Whilst being very positive about the current provision he acknowledged there is still room for improvement when it comes to understanding abuse and its impact more fully. He welcomed the idea of mandatory reporting of incidents within the Church, as recommended by the IICSA final report, and he felt it would be *'quite liberating actually.'*

Among the research participants, there were roughly equal numbers of comments showing a positive commitment to safeguarding training and standards and comments indicating a continuing reluctance to engage with aspects of safeguarding requirements. Within this range, a minority of priests were very positive, and a further minority were reluctant to engage at all.

Diocesan safeguarding staff who design and present training for the priests and deacons and other pastoral staff are key observers of resistance among clergy. One safeguarding professional referred to several priests in their diocese refusing to complete safeguarding training and at least 30 other priests seemingly attempting to avoid the training. Some dioceses now link attendance at training to granting of a *celebret* so that priests cannot celebrate Mass outside their own diocese unless they have completed the training.⁴¹

Resistance of this kind invites exploration and reflection. It may be more important to understand why priests resist a particular training provision than to seek a disciplinary approach to compliance. Training that is genuinely formative needs to be experienced as listening to their needs and concerns as well as ensuring they have the knowledge needed to lead and model good safeguarding practice.

Some reluctance and resistance may be related to a perception that training and procedures constitute more bureaucracy and 'box ticking'. A younger priest expressed concern that compulsory safeguarding training might be seen only as an administrative exercise to satisfy audit requirements. But a monk whose community had faced many allegations and incidents explained how they had come to accept this as part of their new reality: *'We've brought it on ourselves; this is how we now*



need to correct some of the imbalances in the past.' His community now understand that the protocols they have in place are for their own protection as well as the protection of visitors.

Where resistance is found, there is often also a leadership gap. A diocesan safeguarding officer saw the main obstacle to developing a culture of safeguarding as the failure of diocesan trustees to show leadership in this area. Another safeguarding leader described experience of earlier resistance among bishops to the setting up of national structures as part of the One Church approach, for fear such structures would undermine local autonomy. Whilst both of these should now have changed following the IICSA reports and the Elliott Review, they are still part of the story of how resistance may not have been challenged at diocesan level.

One of the priests who had been falsely accused offered a further reflection:

The one thing that I do realise was, this whole area and how it affects the Church, is governed by fear. I can remember going to safeguarding days put on for the priests by the diocese, and we'd all be sitting there, and not only would we be afraid, I mean really afraid, but so very often, the content of what was being dealt with, made it sound like we were being accused as well just for being priests. And that climate of fear seems to dominate everything, not just individual priests but the diocese as well.

His own response, based on his experience was to *'grab hold of your fears, to stop them dictating the rest of your day... when you spend time in prayer, when you face your fears, when you learn to let go and let God do what only he can do, then you can sleep at night.'*

4. The experience of bishops

We listened to five diocesan bishops in interviews, roughly a quarter of the number of diocesan bishops in the geographical dioceses of England and Wales. Two bishops took part in the closed meeting towards the end of the research. Several other bishops expressed warm support for the research at various stages but were unable to participate directly for practical reasons. One bishop did not respond to repeated invitations.

We also listened to many participants' views on how bishops had acted in the different domains of handling abuse allegations and cases, with victims and survivors, alleged and convicted offenders and with affected parishes. Some of these came from direct experience of survivors or of priests or people who had worked closely with bishops or Bishops' Conference structures or agencies. Some perceptions were from a less informed distance and indicated how little many people know about the reality of what bishops face in their multiple roles and responsibilities.

All the bishops described the impact on them of learning about and dealing with the abuse crisis. All also spoke about the transformative impact of listening to survivors. And all spoke about the complex task of

being responsible for priests against whom allegations have been made, and priests who have been convicted and imprisoned.

The personal impact on bishops

Each bishop spoke personally about how the abuse crisis has impacted on their lives. They spoke of being humbled, being challenged and being changed, and of the successive stages of learning about what the abuse crisis means for their ministry and for the Church. Some have only become bishops in recent years yet they inherit responsibility for a legacy of abuse that was unrecognised or mishandled in the past. *'I can't undo what was done in the past'*, more than one said. They were confounded by the reality of abuse; *'I think there's a sort of mysterium iniquitatis, to use that term, at work in the whole area, you know, there's no doubt about it, the mystery of evil is very real'*, one bishop reflected, recognising the damage done by abuse. They also spoke about feeling inadequate: *'I don't even know what I'm doing when I'm meeting with people'*, one said, adding that he would be willing to resign if it was found that he had not handled things properly. They rely on following advice and procedures: *'bishops are only as good as they are advised'*, one said, but they are also increasingly aware that their pastoral instincts should be more important than advice given by insurers. Each also spoke about the importance of knowing their own dependence on God in their ministry. As one bishop put it:

You need to be very firmly rooted in prayer and relationship with our Lord and just keep going back to him all the time, because there's some things we know we might be able to help with, other things, you just kind of think, well, what on earth do I do here?

For another:

I just think, well, if you want me to do this Lord, you'll have to give me the where with all to do it, I, I can only do it as me... and I'll do my best.

Listening to survivors

Each of the bishops spoke about their commitment to listening to survivors and what is asked of them in doing so. Often they are listening to survivors of abuse that took place before they came to their dioceses or to survivors who have experienced poor responses from other Catholic authorities to whom they have disclosed. They spoke about the importance of believing survivors and of accompanying them, and where needed, advocating on their behalf. For one *'when people talk about survivors being aggressive or, or demanding, um no, the survivors are just responding to the hurt that they've received and that's what you have to listen to and to believe and to walk with'*. Some decided to apologise even when the abuse was not within their own sphere of responsibility.

They also recognised that the response to victims is still not adequate: *'I think there's still a way to go on that for us as bishops'*, another said, describing his own experience as 'a bit of a journey'. *'Unless we're survivors ourselves, we'll never fully be able to understand the*

level of pain', he added. Another described his time with survivors as experiences that were 'among the most privileged of my priestly ministry'. Such meetings were 'very humbling because I didn't know how people would react'. For this bishop, there was what he termed 'relational learning, that requires accompaniment, to be with somebody over a period of time', recognising that it can take years for some survivors to share everything they have experienced. For another bishop, the first time he met with survivors, 'I have to be honest, my heart was racing as we were coming up to that meeting because it's not something I've really done before and I just thought, this could be very challenging personally'. Later, he said, he saw such meetings as times 'when I just feel most a pastoral minister'. Another described how when people were crying, he wept with them. Two bishops recalled carefully checking out in advance what they should wear to ease such meetings. There was also a strong sense among the bishops of being humbled and also grateful:

I'm astonished that many of them have the innate goodness, the generosity and actually the Christianity within them to actually look after us, to nurture us, even though we've so badly abused them, let them down.

Listening to and accompanying survivors asks bishops to be vulnerable and to bear some of the pain that is disclosed. It has to be an open-ended process. As one bishop commented, *'the wounds are so deep that there will be some survivors who will probably never be satisfied'*. This may have been intended as a recognition of the depth of the trauma, but it also implies a question which challenges us all. Must there be a period in which healing is achieved? For some, even with good support and help, the wounds will remain. A further question then follows, about how much is expected of bishops in relation to how survivors are supported. How does the whole Church share this responsibility? It was clear in this research that some bishops continue their relationships with survivors beyond initial meetings, but not all may be able to do this.

The complexity of the bishop's role

They also reflected frankly on their role as bishops. One bishop said: *'I think most bishops will say that it's actually an impossible task'*. He listed some of the reasons: multiple new demands on their time, often from external legislation such as GDPR; the expectation to create and work with many committees and commissions, and increasingly with lay trustees on a bishop's council; and the impact on how they work of multiple means of communication. Even belonging to the Bishops' Conference itself, although important, *'brings with it quite a lot of work, and you've got all the diocesan stuff and all the various other things that just go with the role. So yeah, one is well occupied.'*

The expectation that the bishop has to sort everything out also creates a particular burden. One bishop pointed out that people – especially priests – rarely tell bishops the truth. He expressed discomfort that *'what I say can often nudge a conversation completely or hijack it'*. For that reason, he tries to speak last, but this sits uncomfortably with people's expectations that he would be the first to speak. So *'somehow,*



I think most bishops will say that it's actually an impossible task.



the exercise of authority and, and the unquestioning of that authority... perhaps it paralyses people... both the person in authority and the person subject to that authority.'

As the abuse crisis has been revealed over the past thirty years, the bishops, and their response, has always been in a spotlight. They have been criticised both within the Church and in wider society, most seriously in the IICSA investigations. The bishops who spoke to this research were aware of the slowness of their response and the mistakes made. One bishop spoke about the *'delayed understanding'* in the period from the Nolan Review in 2001, which established the One Church approach, to the meeting of the English and Welsh bishops in Valladolid in 2019, at which a number of survivors were present.⁴² He saw this period as a time during which Church authorities and leaders were so concerned to get the policies and procedures right that they overlooked the need to understand the impact of abuse on the victim or survivor.

Another bishop believed this was the right order of priority, that it was important to put robust policies in place first. He concluded that *'perhaps some of that tension is maybe necessary, if you had somebody in the position who was simply being pastoral, there is the risk that they can't see and that you end up, you can't see the wood from the trees.'* In contrast, a different bishop suggested that this approach had caused suffering to victims and survivors in the past:

If we're incapable of empathising and feeling compassion to those who present themselves to us in pain, then what on earth is happening? At the heart of the Church is a crucified Lord, and our response has got to be one that stands at the foot of the cross, like Our Lady, and weeping at the foot of that cross. You don't stand to the side, dispassionately, making theological observations; you run to the foot of the cross and you grasp at the foot and you kiss it, that's the only, the proper response to suffering, not dispassion but compassion.

One bishop was shocked to hear that some dioceses or religious orders are still privileging advice from insurers and lawyers, designed with the good of the institution in mind. A decade ago, responses would very much have been 'lawyer-led', with insurance companies shaping the kind of response to be offered to a victim. He described working to turn this position around but admits that it did provide *'a bit of safety'* for office holders. Bishops are still feeling their way through these dilemmas, learning how to respond, drawing on the expertise of safeguarding professionals. Sometimes this has worked well and sometimes being risk averse and over dependant on professional advice has impeded a pastoral response.

The multiple roles a bishop has to play come back into view here. He must be both pastor and shepherd, and father and brother to his priests, and chair of the diocesan trustees with legal and statutory responsibility for protecting the interests of the trust. This makes apparently simple steps very complex. Even simply saying 'I'm sorry' becomes difficult. The leader of a male religious community facing similar complex responsibilities explained:

Issues around apologies inevitably start to impact upon questions of insurance, and that lawyers and insurers, and lawyers working for





insurers, then start to become involved, so the simple thing of being able to say, 'I'm so sorry' becomes quite a complicated thing.

He described a situation in which a survivor began a legal process but then looked for something more like what he described as *'a process of natural justice and human encounter'*. The dynamics of trying to hold both of these together created *'a very uncomfortable space for all concerned, it's not a comfortable space for the survivor but it certainly isn't a comfortable space for anyone else either.'*

Bishops and accused priests

The bishops spoke about the difficulty of their dual responsibility to support victims and also to support accused priests. One bishop conceded that seen from the perspective of a survivor, it might look very unfair that a bishop attempts to support both parties. He described it as *'a bit difficult path to tread, it really is.'* Whilst the principle of the paramountcy of the victim has been accepted formally by the bishops since 1994, in practice this can be challenging. A bishop described the conflict he experienced:

It's very difficult if, as bishop, you are with victims and survivors and you say to them, I believe you, even though there isn't yet any proof, that I believe and accept what you're saying, which we are encouraged to think and to understand is really important for victim survivors, to be received and accepted and believed. And on the other hand, how you respond as a bishop to a priest, where the default position is one of trust and if there is accountability there, in that direction, and how then you square that, if the priest says, I didn't do these things. Do you believe me, do you trust me? And the Vatican documents are saying you can neither reject nor confirm and it's so hard to be in the middle there.

The same bishop explained that he has *'a theological relationship with priests and deacons, which is different to and complementary to his responsibilities, for example, if he's the Chair of the diocesan trustees.'* He observed that this conflict is recognised by the Elliott Review, *'because on the one hand, within canon law, you are both the judge and the pastoral support. You're the provider of both of these.'* He notes that the new independent National Tribunal Service will take away from the bishop some of that accountability for the canonical judgement, which will be helpful, *'but it doesn't take away the conflict between the sorts of judgements that need to be made pastorally and the provision of support.'*

A member of seminary staff reflected that this area of allegations and whom to believe is, for bishops, *'the thing they are most scared of'* and expressed concern that they recoil rather than have *'courage and faith and step out into that murky chaotic world'*. The temptation to *'hide behind the altar'*, as this staff member described it, relates to the vulnerability that bishops cannot avoid in this area, and how they recognise and work with this experience.

Father, brother, friend or line manager?

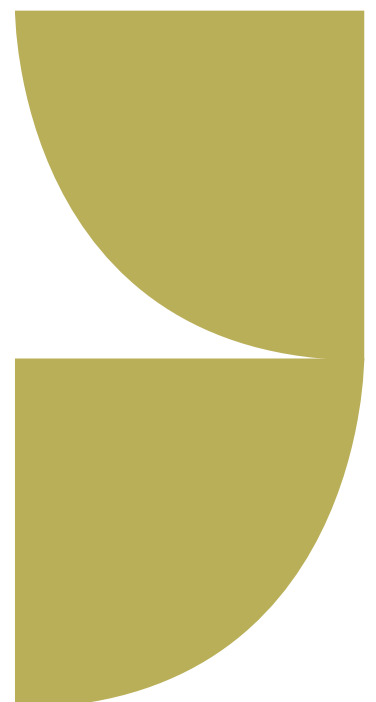
There is a further conflict within the bishop's relationships with the priests in his diocese. He must balance pastoral care and support with proper oversight, including, where necessary, when there are 'grave lapses' and crimes, intervening in a 'firm and decisive, just and impartial' way, to provide 'correction'.⁴³ He remains responsible for the priests in his diocese even when they have been convicted of crimes, unless and until they have been laicised, that is, dismissed from the priesthood and barred from any ministry. In some cases, this may continue for many years; one priest against whom allegations had been made but no charges brought lived under a safeguarding plan for some seventeen years, not allowed to minister or attend Mass in his local parish.

Bishops strive to be close to the priests with whom they share ministry. Many have studied alongside some of their priests in seminary formation and all will have worked closely with priests who take on diocesan roles. One bishop talked of the emotional and pastoral difficulties involved in *'reporting on another brother priest'*, asking himself whether he had done the right thing, knowing the enormous impact this would have on that priest's life. He knew it was the right moral action, but worried about whether his response had been right pastorally.

Another bishop reflected with great candour and compassion on how difficult he finds it to provide pastoral care to accused or convicted priests. He spoke of how he tried to proceed with great caution when cases are unresolved and unproven, leaving priests in what he called the *'twilight zone'*, where nothing was proven but they still have to be subject to restrictions or possibly required to live under a safeguarding plan. He pondered how he felt about men suspected of such abuse, admitting that the bishop may not be the best person to offer them pastoral care. He continued: *'There's a lot of stuff in me that would find it really quite difficult to love them, to accept them, to affirm them'*, adding that he suspects that most bishops and priests would feel the same.

These are dilemmas with no easy answers for bishops, particularly regarding what happens to convicted offenders once they have served their sentences. Some argue that convicted offenders should be laicised, as recommended by the Nolan Report, as this makes their status clear and offers a chance for the offender to re-build his life.⁴⁴ One retired priest who had held relevant diocesan responsibilities described a decision to apply for laicisation for two priests after they were sentenced and imprisoned whether or not they consented. Laicisation may be preferable to remaining under the discipline of a safeguarding plan which restricts what a released offender can do and where he can go.⁴⁵

Others assert that when convicted priests are laicised, they are unsupervised (other than through registration as a sex offender) which may create more risk and vulnerability, and that the Church has a continuing duty of care to monitor and support released offenders, which is easier if they are still held in some way within the Church. Several research participants spoke compassionately about this duty. For a religious sister, *'we need to behave as Church in how we treat these men and their vulnerability'*. A priest whose former colleague had been imprisoned described his willingness to visit the colleague in prison, if the



priest in question wanted this to happen, and explained how he would be willing to support any released offender. He did realise that many others would not feel they could take on such a responsibility.

5. The experience of the Church in public spaces; the impact of IICSA

The impact of the abuse crisis has not only been felt internally in the lives of victims, survivors, parish communities and those in ordained ministry and religious life. It has also changed how the Catholic Church is seen in wider society, which in turn affects both its capacity for moral leadership and its social and educational mission. This is a further level of impact for all members of the Church as well. Some aspects of this impact are explored in a separate report based on a quantitative survey we undertook during this project.⁴⁶

In the qualitative research, we listened to experiences and perceptions related to a particularly significant event in the public life of the Church, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). This Inquiry was briefly described in Chapter One. Here we present aspects of how the research participants experienced or perceived the Inquiry and responded to its reports.

The experience of taking part

A significant number of people in leadership positions in the Catholic Church gave evidence to the Inquiry, including bishops, leaders of religious communities and safeguarding staff and officers.⁴⁷ Many survivors also gave evidence.⁴⁸ Among this project's participants, three office-holders and six survivors gave evidence.

For survivors, the experience was always significant and often positive. As described earlier, for some, it was the first opportunity they had of being listened to, which brought comfort and relief, and an experience of pastoral care which they experienced as lacking in their contact with Catholic institutions. A female survivor who felt better looked after at IICSA than by the Church described feeling *'very lucky to have that opportunity'* to speak. Survivors appreciated how the Inquiry engaged with their experience through the Truth Project and other forums. For some, speaking out was a necessity; one survivor narrated her decision to appear, based on a concern that Catholic survivors were not speaking out, which risked allowing Church officials to escape accountability. Another survivor was motivated by a desire to help the Church to learn and to heal, recognising that most of its members had not concealed or committed any crime.

For one rather isolated survivor, listening to an earlier witness *'empowered me, because the beatings, the strapping to the bed, the torture, and this is all the same institution.'* He also found it *'powerful'* to give evidence in front of a bishop, although another survivor found it difficult to testify in front of the bishop implicated in the mishandling of her case.

There were also some emotionally costly aspects to giving evidence. One survivor spoke of the pain of hearing the evidence given by Catholic leaders, which she perceived as denial and obfuscation. A family member of a survivor who was present at the Inquiry describes the impact of hearing her deceased father's statement read out:

It was only at the IICSA inquiry, my sister and I went down, this was just a few months after my dad died, and they read out my dad's statement there and I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach, it was such a shock to me...actually hearing them, was absolutely sickening, like, you know, I just couldn't believe he went through all that without actually really telling us.

For those in institutional roles in the Church, IICSA was a complex experience and perceptions of its impact on the Church varied significantly. For one office-holder, the experience was difficult but ultimately positive. Although *'rather fearful'* in advance, he described how much he had learned and understood more deeply from the experience of IICSA. Another former office-holder who took part felt that *'the best resolution for the Catholic Church would be, well, first of all, to acknowledge its appalling failings'*, and spoke out strongly about the weaknesses in Catholic safeguarding structures.

Reactions to the report on the Catholic Church

Reactions to the work of IICSA and its findings among the wider group of research participants who didn't take part in IICSA were varied.

One safeguarding professional thought its recommendations were weak, but a religious priest described the report as *'paralysing'*. Some thought that the report gave the Church *'a very hard time'*. One woman was saddened to see the Church portrayed as misogynistic and homophobic, but acknowledged that this was probably deserved. A bishop felt that the amount of attention received was unwarranted and lacking in perspective:

I think the Church is a soft target. Whether it's the Catholic Church, the, Anglican Church or any other church and it's quite obvious that a local authority that was looked at by IICSA recently, has had far more cases.

Some asserted that the understanding shown by some IICSA officials of how Catholic institutions work was inadequate, particularly in relation to religious congregations: *'IICSA could not understand how the EBC was constructed, they could not get their head around it'*, one bishop noted.

Some of those who spoke to us were aware of defensive responses being prepared. A pastoral worker described receiving an email from her diocese asking for prayers for a bishop who might be affected when the IICSA report was due to be published. She didn't know how to process this apparent privileging of concern for a bishop over concern for victims and survivors. Another pastoral worker described frustration because *'only some people could talk about (it) and other people couldn't... and I remember realising I could follow the whole thing myself if I wanted to.'* It was clear from a few voices that what could be described

as Catholic exceptionalism emerges when the Church is challenged, a sense that the Church is somehow different from other institutions or entitled to different treatment.

Some reactions were complex. A younger adult described listening to a survivor speak on broadcast news about the report and blaming ‘the Catholic Church’ and reacting defensively; *‘I found my mind thinking, but that’s not the Church, that’s, it’s the bishops, it’s not the Church, the Church is us’* and then feeling *‘ashamed’* at her own reaction, her resistance to hearing what the survivor was saying. Many parish members, priests, religious, and bishops spoke about the impact of the reports on them, of feeling disturbed and chastened by the extent of the abuse and the evidence of cover-ups and other mishandling. Most felt some level of shame for the Church and about being part of the church. A safeguarding officer expressed disappointment that media coverage of IICSA’s report on the Catholic Church faded so quickly; the release date coincided with breaking news about the Chair of the UK Football Association having to resign over offensive comments made in public, a story which dominated headlines.

Others saw the IICSA process as crucial and ultimately helpful. A leader of a male religious community thought that IICSA *‘needed to happen and needed to shine a spotlight into a number of areas.’* A priest with experience of diocesan child protection work said:

Institutionally, despite warm words and things having been said over the years, we were rightly caned by IICSA because we hadn’t altered our behaviour sufficiently for people to see that the message had gone home, and I think that’s going to be a very steep climb for a lot of people.

Among research participants, no-one disagreed with the IICSA recommendations, but some felt they did not go far enough in calling for change. One religious sister with experience in safeguarding described the final report on the Catholic Church as *‘wishy-washy in its recommendations’*, containing *‘nothing new’*. She expected it to be more *‘cutting edge’* in its judgements, addressing, for example, the need for different leadership or culture change.

These diverse reactions illustrate a pattern we see throughout our data. Across the Catholic community the experience of the abuse crisis and how it has been handled confuse and disorientate our views of the Church and its leaders and lead to multiple interpretations. Some get caught up in the same patterns of denial or minimising that are implicated in mishandling; others practise openness to the reality as it is told, however searing. Some want resignations; others want to know that future responses will be truly pastoral and reflective of the Gospel.

How the Bishops’ Conference response to the IICSA report was seen

Some perceived the Bishops’ Conference response to the IICSA report as weak. One priest saw it as still *‘combative’* rather than accepting full responsibility. Another participant felt that the Church’s response to IICSA was *‘very sort of, of PR legalese’*, *‘crafted to kill the story’* and lacking in any pastoral response and concern for victims and

The response of the Bishops’ Conference to the IICSA report

As already noted, the Bishops’ Conference immediately accepted the recommendations of the IICSA report in November 2020. They issued a public statement expressing sorrow and making a fresh commitment to listening to survivors. The IICSA report was received at the same time as the Elliott Review report which the bishops had commissioned a year earlier.⁴⁹

Both together resulted in an action plan which was also published.⁵⁰ The areas of action agreed by the bishops covered:

- Leadership: appointing a lead bishop and a lead from religious life groups for safeguarding.
- Training: ensuring training is mandatory and ongoing for all who minister in the Church, including volunteers and employees, who have safeguarding responsibilities.
- Compliance: ensuring that non-compliance with safeguarding policies is tackled and that sanctions can be applied if compliance failures persist.
- External auditing: ensuring that effective independent auditing of safeguarding practice happens.
- Canon Law: requesting the Holy See to redraft parts of canon law relating to child sexual abuse.
- Improving national safeguarding policies and procedures.
- Improving how complaints are handled.

survivors. Several survivors and some priests were very critical of the Cardinal remaining in post after the Inquiry report was published and some thought he should have resigned. One woman described herself as *'getting angrier and angrier'* at the bishops' response, which she felt was defensive. Another woman with significant Church experience described herself as *'horrified'*; *'we're no further ahead than we were in the days when I was saying, perhaps we don't take it seriously enough'*. She expressed concern for the younger generation of Catholics who inherit this legacy.

One chair of a diocesan safeguarding body was disappointed that the IICSA experience had not prompted the bishops to commission research into how and why abuse happened in past decades. A typical judgement from a leader of a religious community described the bishops' response as *'reactive manoeuvres'*, which he feared would not improve the situation but rather *'it's my view, they'll make it worse'*.

The formal response of the Bishops' Conference to the Inquiry reports may have disappointed some, but this research discovered a wider picture. There was also humility in the reflective responses of individual bishops and evidence of a willingness to learn from the experience. None of the bishops who spoke to this research regretted being called to account by secular authorities and the media.

The experience of the Inquiry also dramatized some of the tensions faced by bishops. One bishop described the privilege of being exposed to the accounts and courage of victims and survivors, seeing IICSA not as humiliation but an opportunity to learn about how people's lives had been changed by abuse and how the Church had failed them. The expectation that bishops will behave and speak in a certain way was also visible. One survivor was not impressed by the Cardinal but found that other bishops were *'more kind of credible and essentially humble'*. A male leader of a religious congregation noted the irony that the Inquiry called for more centralised control in the Church, when it is more usual for the Church to be criticised for being too centralised.

After the Inquiry: implications and action

Most participants appreciated that the Church now faces considerable pressure to ensure that procedures are in place and adhered to. But there were also doubts. A bishop and a religious sister expressed concern that being publicly shamed has driven Church institutions and hierarchy to copy the landscape of safeguarding in the secular world by accepting the *'received wisdom'* of a compliance based model, rather than seeking an authentic model expressing our own best principles and values. Some fear that the new model will leave something of a vacuum in the response to survivors.

Although some research participants felt that setting up the Elliott Review before the IICSA report came out was premature and hasty, one senior safeguarding officer said that the bishops had felt IICSA *'very keenly and were therefore determined to implement the Review, and the recommendations speedily'*. An experienced bishop gave the example of the appointment of a lead bishop for safeguarding as a direct result of the IICSA recommendations.



The formal response of the Bishops' Conference to the Inquiry reports may have disappointed some, but this research discovered a wider picture. There was also humility in the reflective responses of individual bishops and evidence of a willingness to learn from the experience. None of the bishops who spoke to this research regretted being called to account by secular authorities and the media.



6. Conclusion


This chapter has presented a range of diverse voices from those who make up the local church, the diocese and parishes, describing how they have experienced the abuse crisis. This portrait makes visible several significant themes and dynamics. It is clear first of all that everyone is affected; whether it is a young adult working in the Church, a recently ordained priest, or a bishop who inherits cases of abuse and mishandling which still cry out for justice. The words of one participant summed this up: *'Everyone is somehow implicated. I can't describe it but that's my sense now, that we're all part, we are all, collectively, part of the problem and part of the solution.'*

The whole Catholic community is experiencing the impact of this crisis although many may not be consciously aware of how it has affected Catholic life because they have not been invited to reflect and notice. The young adults who took part in a focus group in this research were interesting in this regard. They had not been directly affected; but when invited to explore their thoughts, feelings and instincts, they realised how much the deeper dynamics operating in the abuse crisis affected their experience of the Church.

The words of an active female parish member quoted earlier are worth recalling: *'We're the body of Christ and if one part of that body is injured or is broken, we're all broken a bit and injured a bit.'* If this is the case, that the whole local church, the whole body of believers, is *'broken a bit'*, how do we enable the whole Catholic community to understand better what has happened and recognise what it asks of us?

The second theme that emerges is that the way in which the Catholic Church organises itself has made it more difficult to achieve the right or best response to victims and communities. The structures of ministry and leadership and the expectations placed on priests and bishops have often impeded or blunted pastoral instincts. The cultures of local church life and relationships have not helped. They do not build maturity and transparency in communication. They do not allow adequate space for women's voices to be heard. They do not sufficiently understand the vulnerability of priests.

Finally, there is also a more hopeful thread to the experiences described, a thread which is explored in more detail in Chapter Five. When people are able to hear the real story, most of all to understand the experience and pain of victims and survivors, but also to know about the desolation and grief that office-holders feel when confronted with difficult tasks and inherited failure, they respond with faith and authentic compassion. But this leads to a further question; what more do we need to do to enable and support such responses, not just in the parishes and leadership ministries directly affected, but everywhere, in all areas of the local church?



When people are able to hear the real story, most of all to understand the experience and pain of victims and survivors, but also to know about the desolation and grief that office-holders feel when confronted with difficult tasks and inherited failure, they respond with faith and authentic compassion.

