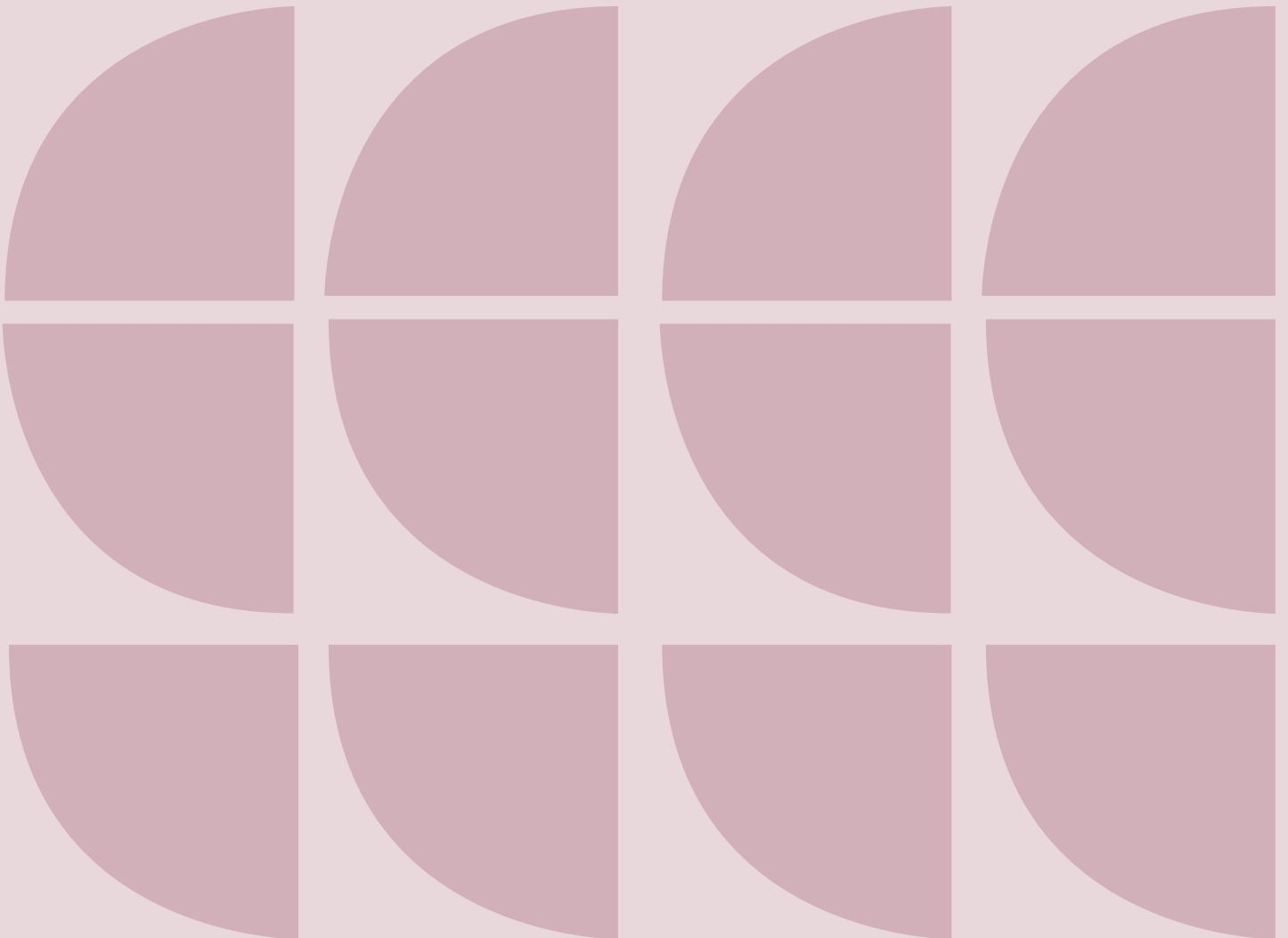




Chapter Six

Catholic culture and the structures of our common life



1 Introduction: The child abuse crisis as a catalyst for change

The child abuse crisis raises crucial questions for all of us in the Catholic community. Some of these questions relate directly to how the abuse was allowed to happen in the first place. Others arise from the failures in our response and from what we need to learn about ourselves.

Why have so many survivors felt betrayed or abandoned by Catholic institutions or leaders?

Why has it been so difficult for office-holders and others to listen to and believe survivors?

How far is the whole Catholic community involved in what has gone wrong?

Which of our structures or systems are implicated in how the abuse crisis has happened? Why has the Church's response to victims and survivors so often failed to reflect the Gospel?

What does this ongoing crisis tell us about the cultures and relationships within the community of faith?

How can we restore or heal what has been broken, most of all for survivors and others directly affected, but also for the whole Catholic community?

The assumption underlying this research is that we need to explore these and other questions by examining some of the relationships, attitudes and practices that make up the culture of our parishes and communities. These relationships and habits can be understood as the structures of our common life. Frequently they are also systemic, meaning they arise from and are embedded in a larger system of thinking and ideas that influence all aspects of Catholic life. They reflect, or sometimes fail to reflect, Catholic teaching about the Church, its ministries and its mission.

Such exploration is difficult, sensitive and painful. It is clear from some of the voices we heard and from reactions when we described this research in various settings that many people would prefer not to think about, or even know about, the child abuse crisis. This reflects a range of reactions. Some would rather it was brushed under the carpet because it is so distressing to think about and disturbs their sense of the Church as a place of refuge from the world. *'I think the hurt has been greater in the Church because it is the one area where people didn't expect this'*, a priest from a directly affected parish said. Some laypeople have simply been unable to believe that abuse has happened because of how they see priests as 'special', as icons of Christ. Others may avoid it because they feel powerless to do anything about it. A different response was suggested by a laywoman: *'there would be a sense where it's not our responsibility to take action here, it's the bishops, you know.'*

But this was not the only story. There were also many voices that expressed a different view, a willingness to recognise and learn from this crisis and discern its meaning. These voices use words such as *'catalyst'* and *'necessity'* to characterise what has happened. For one woman,

What we mean by 'structures', 'habits' and 'culture'

We use the terms 'structures', 'practices' and 'habits' interchangeably in this text. Parish life is made up of many structures and practices. Some are small; addressing priests using their title or asking permission before putting up a notice, for example, or how music is planned. Others are institutional: finance committees and parish councils, and structures which join the local community to the wider Church, including the appointment of priests to the parish and the requirements of safeguarding policy.

All these and other structures and practices are embedded in parish cultures, in the relationships, attitudes and assumptions we carry. Some are governed by the Church's law which is determined (and sometimes changed) by the Pope; many are not and can change more easily. The culture in each parish, diocese or religious community is unique to that body, whilst sharing many aspects.

'I think this is probably the most important thing to happen to the Church, do you know, I think the church would never have fundamentally changed that, the way that it has had to, without this event.' She continues: *'it's a process of harsh and painful and humiliating change but actually it's necessary because, you know, the pride and power and status prevented it from evolving.'* A leader of a women's religious community saw this experience as *'purification... bringing a haughty Church down to its knees'*.

It was not just women who spoke in this way. A lay man saw it as calling for a stripping out of false securities. A priest commented that *'no matter how painful this situation is, the fact that it's broken might be a blessing in a hundred years' time.'* For another priest, when affected individuals or communities speak, whether in anger or other emotions, *'they are part of God's message to us that we have to be open to receiving'*.

For some, this points to the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. A religious woman commented: *'Thank God for the Holy Spirit that we were woken up'*. A priest and a deacon both interpreted the crisis and its mishandling as a refusal of the action of the Spirit, a refusal to trust in how the Spirit guides the Church into newness. That refusal is expressed in fear of letting go of power and lack of trust in the baptised and in habits of trying to control information and events. A bishop reflectively asked: *'Where is this part of God's plan or God's mission in the church? What is God teaching us?'* Another experienced priest made a similar comment: *'this is where, you know, the Gospel can really make demands on us to do a bit of deeper thinking as to what we feel is being asked for here.'*

All these reactions matter. It is important to understand the impact of abuse and how mishandling and poor response to victims have happened, and why people are passive or turn their faces away from the child abuse crisis. These behaviours and reactions arise from and within the culture of our relationships and self-understanding, which is structured by Catholic teaching as well as by our personal histories and our experience of the society in which we live. It is even more important to see this exploration in the faith-led framework offered by the comments above in which people are seeking to discern the meaning of the crisis. There is positive and constructive potential if we begin from an openness to how the Holy Spirit is at work in this experience and if we search for what might be redemptive and healing. This framework holds out hope. An older priest had this confidence:

I don't think it's a lost cause, and, and I think it could be part of the continual adult growth of the Church that we could actually look at these topics today and secure from some people quite a healthy response.

In this chapter, we explore aspects of the culture and structures of Catholic life which emerged across all the voices who spoke to us and which shed light on the abuse crisis and its mishandling.



It is clear from some of the voices we heard and from reactions when we described this research in various settings that many people would prefer not to think about, or even know about, the child abuse crisis.



2. Silences, silencing and not believing

The theme of silences and being silenced, and the secrecy fostered by silence, emerged repeatedly.

- Survivors described being silenced by their abusers, usually priests or teachers whom they regarded as powerful adults. One survivor recalled: *'you're told to think nothing of it because he's controlling your mind, he's controlling everything'*. Some were silenced because they had no language to describe what had happened to them. Most could not tell their parents what had happened; some only disclosed to family members many decades later, and even then, some were not believed. Others kept their abuse secret from their parents in order not to disturb their parents' faith. Some feared they would not be believed because of the status of priests or their relationship with the family. Some were unable to speak about what had happened, not even in counselling.
- The ideal of the Catholic family sometimes led to other silences in the past. A family might be outwardly devout but the inner reality was different for some children who described violence or neglect. In the past, some families knew that abuse has happened and asked the relevant institution to act, but quietly so as to avoid publicity or scandal. Abuse was kept secret within and by some families. One survivor described his Catholic family life as *'quite a secretive buttoned-up environment'*, which meant that he 'fitted in' to a culture of secrecy surrounding abuse in a junior seminary.
- For laypeople in parishes where a priest has been removed because of allegations or convicted of an offence, there is a silence if they are not given accurate information about what has happened or invited into spaces where they can ask questions and search for understanding.
- When there is a case in a parish or school elsewhere in the diocese or a media report about the Catholic Church and child abuse in this country, if there is a silence from priests and deacons, people are left to interpret for themselves. They may feel it says that this issue does not matter or does not concern you. Some see this as deliberate secrecy which causes anger and mistrust. This silence may also allow misinformation to spread.
- Sometimes people decide to silence themselves: one man described hiding his set of books by Jean Vanier after the revelations that Vanier had been involved in abusive relationships with women in the l'Arche community.
- For priests who have been accused but where the police and the Crown Prosecution Service have decided there will be no prosecution, there often remains a grey area. They may return to ministry after psychological assessment but do not feel exonerated. There remains a silence around their experience. Other priests in their dioceses or communities are silent or silenced because they don't



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know what has happened or what is true. Laypeople in the parishes they have served may know that there has been an allegation but they don't know the full story and may feel disturbed or angry.

- There are other habitual silences and secrets in the Church which are implicated. Priestly celibacy is rarely explained or discussed, nor is homosexuality among priests. Few priests or pastoral leaders are able to be open about their sexual orientation if they are gay. Catholic teaching on sexuality is experienced as a set of rules which do not encourage openness about the complexity and reality of the sexual aspects of people's lives.
- There are silences in leadership. Some of these are practical; when office-holders do not respond to survivors who make contact, or response is slow, it feels to victims as though their voice and experience do not matter, that you are silenced. When a priest or bishop is suddenly removed or unexpectedly resigns or disappears, if there is a silence about what has happened and why, rumours grow, and people are more likely to turn to social or mainstream media for information.
- Other silences are more directly concerned with an absence of the leadership needed to model and initiate a deeply pastoral and receptive response to survivors and in the growth in understanding of the wider Catholic community. There is a silence of omission when people do not feel free to challenge those in leadership or to tell them the truth or to give honest feedback on their behaviour or decisions.
- There are silences in seminaries. We heard that students for the priesthood may arrive with openness and varied life experiences, but then find that the constant scrutiny of their behaviour, relationships and motivations compels either silence or secrecy, particularly if they are struggling.

Each of these silences has its own complexity. Some are habitual for good reasons or reflect necessary practices. We rightly expect the careful scrutiny of students for the priesthood, for example, not least because the child abuse crisis has directed attention towards ensuring that those ordained to priestly ministry have sufficient human and psycho-sexual maturity. Bishops and other leaders are constrained in what they can say in public by ethical considerations of confidentiality and sometimes also by legal processes. Sometimes those in leadership in parishes or at diocesan level may simply not know what they can say or how they should say it, pointing to the need to think more deeply about what constitutes good practice in communication with affected parishes and dioceses.

Other silences are troubling. When laypeople in affected parishes would rather avoid the subject and do not wish to talk about it even when the Catholic Church or one of its institutions is prominent in the local or national news, this invites reflection. Is this self-silencing another expression of the secrecy and passivity that has been part of Catholic culture in the past and is still deep in the habits and attitudes of many Catholics? Perhaps it reflects a culture of powerlessness and indicates that despite Vatican II's theology of shared responsibility, the baptised

still feel disempowered and disinclined to ask questions. It could also suggest they have simply not seen any models of how to raise awkward or sensitive questions or ever been encouraged in a parish context to do so. It is also clear from the research that many feel that there has been an absence of leadership from the bishops in England and Wales, a silence they would like to see broken. This may not be the perception of bishops themselves, but it was widely reflected in the voices we heard.

Breaking the habits of silence and secrecy

Many silences could be broken or avoided, creating a different culture of relationships. Most of the silences revealed in the child abuse crisis are not healthy and do not give us life. They fail victims and survivors and fail Catholic communities affected by the crisis. Silence is not just absence; it communicates, giving messages which are often absorbed without noticing, particularly in a context such as the Catholic Church, where habits of silence and secrecy are deeply embedded. Silence about abuse goes further; it can leave people feeling affected in unexpected ways. One laywoman who felt that information about an offending priest had been withheld spoke about the importance of avoiding secrecy: *'It's much more healthy because then you're not left feeling, you feel, it's a strange word to use but you almost feel dirty... you feel part of a system that's dirty.'*

The question here is whether and how habits of silence and secrecy in the culture of Catholic life have contributed to the abuse crisis and its mishandling. In a culture where some things cannot be talked about, or where large numbers of people do not feel they have a voice, it is not surprising that many people self-silence when faced with a reality such as the child abuse crisis. Catholic women in particular inherit a cultural legacy of the habit of silence, a legacy that many now challenge and resist but which is still powerful. One of the risks of silence is that it gives a message that people are not allowed or expected to know something. It is worth recalling here a voice already quoted earlier, someone from a parish whose former priest had been imprisoned for abuse offences:

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.

The flourishing of the whole community is impeded if people are not allowed to know about such important matters. If you know about what is happening, as far as it possible to know, and feel you can speak, ask questions and be heard, you can take responsibility. Sometimes it may be the case that a leader can only explain in a very limited way what has happened. What matters is the sense that people have been given as much information as is possible, and that there is a relationship of real trust between people and priests or other leaders. People will understand real constraints when they are accurately explained. But unexplained silence and secrecy diminish trust. They also foster clericalism. As one priest observed: *'the real sin of clericalism is the idea that you couldn't possibly know as much as I do about something because I'm a priest.'*

The wound of not being allowed to know

Bernard G. Prusak, an American ethicist, has written about the abuse scandal as revealing 'wrongs done to people as knowers' within how the Catholic Church works.⁶¹ Borrowing from the work of a philosopher, Miranda Fricker, he points out that knowledge is power;

knowing things enables us to make something of ourselves and to make a mark in the world. To those same ends, self-knowledge is also invaluable. But what about when we don't know what to make of a situation, or how to describe what has just happened to us? What about when we don't know whom to tell, or whether we will be believed? Imagine being told that no one will believe you. Or imagine being told that you don't know what you're talking about. Or that what you think you know can't be true.

Following Fricker, he observes that when we are 'degraded' as knowers, we are degraded as human persons, so central to our humanity is our capacity to know. He applies this idea particularly to victims of abuse but it can also be applied to communities. When laypeople are not told about matters that affect them, or not treated as people who are competent to know, this is both an injustice and a wound.

Silence also inhibits the pastoral response to victims and survivors and others affected by the abuse crisis within the Church. The Catholic community is usually strikingly compassionate when people are suffering. Catholic charities such as CAFOD and the SVP, and many local projects working with homeless people, foodbanks and refugees testify to immense generosity and willingness to enter into other people's need. Bereavement ministry is increasing, showing that people are willing to be sensitive companions to those who are grieving. The silent suffering of victims and survivors of abuse rarely needs financial support; but it does need acknowledgement, compassion and courage. If we can kiss the crucifix with the broken body of Christ on Good Friday, and venerate martyrs, both old and new, we should not turn our faces from encounters with the grievous reality of abuse.

Why has it been so difficult to believe victims and survivors?

In Chapter Two, we heard some of the voices of victims and survivors who had tried to disclose their experience of abuse by a priest or in a Catholic institutions and were met with denial and disbelief. Although this may now largely have changed as a result of better training and awareness, the impact on those who came forward earlier remains painful and the habit of disbelief still needs to be challenged. Why has it been so difficult to believe victims and to accept that priests and other Catholic office-holders have abused children or others in their care? A female survivor who has been very active in the Church had a clear view: *'I think just on an institutional level, I think there has been a cultural denial.'*

The denial and disbelief are not just encountered when victims seek to disclose their abuse to individual office-holders. They are also found in how parish communities react when cases come to light. A female survivor described attitudes she had heard expressed by laypeople about a particular case: *'they thought people were just making it up because they wanted money because it was about compensation.'* Sometimes this disbelief is not so much about whether the victim is telling the truth but about how people see the alleged abuser. In one of the parish situations described in this research, people simply refused to accept that a priest whose ministry they had experienced was guilty of abuse, reflecting how as Catholics we are deeply schooled to trust priests. The priest accused of abuse may also deny that he is guilty, even when a criminal prosecution is brought and he is convicted. In a parish where this was the case, a layperson commented *'You know, can a Catholic priest get a just trial in this country? I don't know, I really don't know.'* In the same parish, someone who worked in a school added:

'I've always been taught to believe people who disclose, disclosure should always be believed. And I struggled with that and thinking... it just made it different because, you know, I suppose my sympathy was with Father.'

Silence as a positive practice

There are positive experiences of silence in Christian faith and Catholic practice. Monastic and contemplative communities live in ways that chose silence in large parts of daily life in order to be receptive to God's self-communication. Many laypeople as well as those who are ordained find that practices of silence found within traditions such as Ignatian or Carmelite spirituality are deeply nourishing. Such silences are different because they are chosen and work to enable communication rather than to prevent it or maintain secrecy. There are also times when silence is chosen for the sake of the Gospel; the silence of martyrs who will not deny their faith is a profound one.

When encounters with people who have experienced traumatic harm are possible, silence can play a profound role. We can choose not to have a voice, not to defend or justify or try to explain, in order that their voice can be restored and heard. Being present and listening in silence is sometimes a way we can give away power and offer to be witnesses to another person's pain. Brendan Geary, a Marist brother who attended Scottish child abuse enquiry hearings relating to abuse in his own religious congregation, has written about listening to the survivors of that abuse. He reflected that such silent presence

may be precisely what is called for if we wish to respond to the sufferings and tragedies of others, and to be with them in their sorrow and their grieving. The act of witnessing requires that we let go of our own need for a role, or our need to "do something".⁶²

As a safeguarding professional remarked, it is *'always easier not to believe'*. Other clergy find it particularly difficult to believe that a priest whom they have known has abused: *'you just couldn't believe that he'd behave like this.... we'd talked at school, we'd been in the SVP together and all this, and nothing had come to light'*. A priest reflected on a particularly shocking case of rape by a priest of a victim who had come to him for confession:


Of course, I was attacked by some of the clergy for saying that I believed her. I now do believe her, even more so. I think that, I mean, I couldn't be absolutely certain but I think I believed her because she's stuck to that story ever since and, as I told you, it's detailed and anybody could read about it on the internet, if they dug deep enough.

When I first said I believed her, it was for her sake, I was saying that for her sake and that proves right because at ten o'clock in the day, she appeared at my door to thank me and say how much it had meant to her, so that was an important moment. But at the same time, other priests would not have believed her because she had a chequered history.


This difficulty in believing when someone discloses abuse has also happened in Catholic families. Several survivors talked about how their parents or other family members refused to believe a victim's experience because they found it so difficult to accept that a priest had done this. In the case of the survivor quoted at the beginning of this section, a family member would not believe a survivor until she checked his story with her own parish priest who confirmed that the priest involved was known to have abused children.

A tendency towards not believing allegations of abuse is not confined to Catholic settings. It happens across many other institutional settings in which abuse has happened. A report commissioned by IICSA examined a wide range of evidence about the ideas and attitudes which are embedded in wider social culture about child abuse. The report identified 'dominant discourses (that) appeared to take for granted as "truths" certain ideas relating to child sexual abuse'.⁶³ These included habits of deflection, denial and disbelief. In the IICSA report summing up the experience of around 6000 victims and survivors who spoke to the Truth Project, not being believed was a common experience.⁶⁴ But this does not make it more acceptable that Catholic office-holders and communities have been so slow to believe victims who disclose abuse and believe that priests have abused. It is little comfort to know that we have behaved just like any other institution, inclined to defend those in positions of trust and resistant to the voices of those who confront us with accounts of failure and harm.

There is now greater awareness of what should happen when someone discloses abuse in a setting related to the Catholic Church. The guidance from the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency states that anyone who has a formal role or ministry as a volunteer or staff member should 'listen and acknowledge what is said without passing judgement or minimising the information', when someone makes an allegation or discloses abuse.⁶⁵ Alongside this guidance, many within the Church have become aware of the importance of believing those who disclose because they recognise the pain and need of victims and the culpability



The wounds of not being believed still exist for many survivors. The work of changing Catholic culture so that within the Catholic community and its office-holders, victims find those who will believe them as well as those who will listen, acknowledge and act professionally in response, is still in progress.



of the Church. There is a significant difference between 'listening and acknowledging' and 'believing', and which of these is practised may depend on where you stand. For safeguarding staff, for example, who have to deal with both victims and alleged offenders, 'listening and acknowledging' defines a professional stance. But it may not meet the needs of victims. The wounds of not being believed still exist for many survivors. The work of changing Catholic culture so that within the Catholic community and its office-holders, victims find those who will believe them as well as those who will listen, acknowledge and act professionally in response, is still in progress.

3. Clericalism: a whole Church concern

It is not surprising that many of the voices heard in this research pointed to or described habits and practices associated with clericalism when trying to understand how abuse and mishandling have happened. The cultural habits just described, of silences and secrecy, and of difficulties in believing that priests have abused children, also point to elements of clericalism. It is clear in wider literature about the abuse crisis that many of these habits and attitudes are implicated both in how the abuse happened and in how the Church's response has lacked compassion and justice. This research provides extensive evidence of how clericalism is still pervasive in our parishes and dioceses in England and Wales and how it is implicated in the abuse crisis and subsequent mishandling.

There was little doubt among research participants about the connections between clericalism and abuse. They spoke of how clericalism has helped create a context which has been conducive to abuse and to mishandling of the response. The priest was and perhaps still is seen as a powerful and trusted figure, which meant that children were left alone with them, and victims were unable to resist and then unable to disclose what had happened because they thought they would not be believed or because abusers told them to be silent. Victims also assumed that their families would not believe abuse by a priest had happened because they knew how the priest was regarded by their parents. Some adults would, in the past, have regarded it as sinful even to accuse a priest of abuse.

Clericalism is also associated with mishandling and particularly with the failure to believe when people make allegations of abuse. The systemic nature of clericalism was and sometimes is still visible in how victims were disregarded or mistrusted because the priority was to protect the reputation of the particular priest who was accused and of the priesthood as a whole. In the past, it led to the habit of moving a priest alleged or known to be an abuser or sending him for treatment or to a different kind of work. Clericalism is still implicated in how people feel unable to challenge behaviour or ask questions of priests, although there is now a better understanding of safeguarding principles and boundaries that help everyone, including priests. It also affects what happens when a parish community has to come to terms with knowing that a priest who served in their parish has abused. As explored earlier in Chapter Three,

a community that has developed mature collaborative relationships will be better able to respond with compassion than a parish where relationships still reflect clericalist assumptions and habits.

'Above and apart'; How clericalism operates

'We've put people on this pedestal and we've left them there.'

Much of how clericalism operates lies in attitudes and perceptions. Many research participants spoke about how priests are seen as superior, 'god-like', on pedestals, untouchable, people who can do no wrong. A priest is seen as an 'alter Christus', an icon of Christ, and therefore assumed to be holy by default. Even the young adults who spoke to us recognised this problem. One young woman thought that we are influenced by 'conceptions of sanctity' in our perceptions of priests; *'they're above us, as opposed to being human too'*. It is not only in laypeople's perceptions of priests that the pedestal still exists. A sense of superiority is sometimes evident in the attitude of some priests. The same young woman recalled an episode she had witnessed:

I remember a time, at my church, where, I think it was an old lady, was trying to walk down some steps to get to the church and there were two seminarians who'd come, because I think it was Mass at Chrism or something, so they'd all come back from a seminary and I distinctly remember one of the seminarians saying, Oh, would you like some help and, and two of them helped her, one on either side of her, because she took their arms and one of the seminarians said, Oh isn't

Defining clericalism

Beyond 'Bad Apples': Understanding Clergy Perpetrated Sexual Abuse as a Structural Problem and Cultivating Strategies for Change.

A research project carried out at Fordham University in the USA produced a report based on an in-depth survey of 300 people in which they discuss the links between clericalism and abuse. They analyse how clericalism is expressed and maintained in cultural attitudes and habits related to sex, gender and power and how these interact. They describe clericalism as 'an invisible backdrop' of our life together in the Catholic Church. Their definition of clericalism is useful:

A structure of power that isolates clergy and sets priests above and apart, granting them excessive authority, trust, rights, and responsibilities while diminishing the agency of lay people and religious.⁶⁶

One of the priests who took part in this research gave another insightful explanation:

Clericalism, as I understand it, is, is a kind of expression of power and status where people, where priests afford to themselves a distinctiveness that is above the kind of expectations that we should have of anybody and that what they, what they do is right because they do it, and if it gets to that stage, then, you know, you've lost all moral compass altogether.

Pope Francis has spoken frequently about clericalism, including in his opening address to the Synod of Bishops' meeting in October 2018:

It is therefore necessary, on the one hand, to decisively overcome the scourge of clericalism... Clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation that interprets the ministry received as a power to be exercised rather than as a free and generous service to be given. This leads us to believe that we belong to a group that has all the answers and no longer needs to listen or learn anything, or that pretends to listen. Clericalism is a perversion and is the root of many evils in the Church: we must humbly ask forgiveness for this and above all create the conditions so that it is not repeated.⁶⁷

Other authors have also offered definitions of clericalism:

Nicholas Senz: 'Clericalism is a disordered attitude toward clergy, an excessive deference, and an assumption of their moral superiority.'⁶⁸

Thomas Plante: 'the tendency to allow a small group of highly regarded and special leaders to have the power and privilege to make all or most of the important and critical decisions for the organization and those within it.'⁶⁹

Gerard Arbuckle: 'the idealization of the priesthood, and by extension, the idealization of the Catholic Church... linked to a sense of entitlement, superiority and exclusion, and abuse of power.'⁷⁰

Marie Keenan: 'The word clericalism is used to describe the situation where priests live in a hermetical world, set apart from and set above the non-ordained members of the Catholic Church. The word is often used to describe the attitude that the clerical state is of divine origin and that it represents a higher calling than that of the lay state. It is a word often associated with a presumption of superiority.'⁷¹

it so lovely for you to be walked down the steps by seminarians and I thought, are you kidding me?

When priests are seen as superior, it generates a culture of deference which means people do not feel able to question or challenge them. Undoubtedly this is changing; laypeople are more willing to express disagreement or question arrangements, particularly as parish re-organisation has meant significant changes which affect everyone. But deferential attitudes and habits are still ingrained and lead to a desire to protect priests by minimising or denying the experience of abuse, or even refusing to believe it has happened.

It also means that many laypeople feel powerless or unable to act or to lead unless or until a priest invites them to do so. A culture of clericalism works against the possibilities of mature collaboration and shared responsibility. A laywoman who had been involved in Catholic education described how modes of behaviours that are commonplace in other professional settings such as admitting mistakes, apologising and giving feedback and mutual challenge, don't happen in the Church: *'We don't see any of those things in parishes and yet they are a natural part of behaviour.'*

Clericalism and recently ordained priests

Clericalism is visible in any behaviour that assumes or makes priests or indeed seminarians exceptional or entitled to special treatment. One of the disturbing aspects of the research was that a large proportion of voices expressed particular concern about the attitudes and behaviour of more recently ordained priests (sometimes described as 'young priests'). *'They make themselves more aloof'*, one woman commented. For another, *'They seem so much more separated somehow and so much more above and theoretical and academic and they're career minded, all that kind of thing.'* Even a bishop thought that newer priests *'have more outward signs of clericalism'*. Several found the attachment to cassocks and older styles of vestments in some newer priests a barrier; for others, the difficulty lay in their *'intransigence'* and *'certainty'*, their need to be in control, which they related to immaturity. An experienced priest worried about *'whether they are in any sense at home in their own skins.'* He made an explicit link to abuse: *'Even if they don't personally abuse anybody ... the kind of parish structures that they will put in place won't help people grow and ultimately people won't be safe.'*

This area of reflection raised questions about what happens in seminary formation in particular. We heard informed accounts of how seminaries now work to ensure that extensive support is given for 'human formation', the process of growing into various dimensions of maturity. Yet even though formation programmes may be tackling the right issues in an appropriate and professional way, the embedded culture of seminaries may work as a second 'informal curriculum' giving different messages which are sometimes more powerful than the formal curriculum. People puzzle over what they experience in this group of priests once they are working in parishes. For some, there was a recognition that those being formed for priesthood grew up in a social and cultural context in which people's trust in almost all institutions has



A culture of clericalism works against the possibilities of mature collaboration and shared responsibility.



fractured, very little is accepted as 'true', and identities are politicised. There are also generational differences within the Catholic experience. Some recently ordained priests may be expressing a cultural and personal need in how they behave which differs from the concerns and needs of older generations of Catholics. They may also see clerical dress as an important form of witness. But for some parish members, the surrounding culture of clericalism is again implicated; certain styles of dress, for example, communicate messages about clerical power and ideas about priesthood which they find unhelpful.

There is a challenge here to find ways to build mutual understanding of all the perspectives involved and to explore how different generations see things. It helps for communities to be able to question and understand how recently ordained priests see their identity and task and even their liturgical preferences; and for communities to explain their responses and reasoning too. But such conversations need to be genuine and open-hearted dialogues in which all are invited to notice and re-consider attitudes and behaviour.

Clericalism as a problem of the whole Church: how laypeople collude

Many also acknowledged that laypeople collude with clericalism. We inherit a fear of sounding disrespectful, a sense that we should not question or complain or challenge. We join in habits which support clericalism such as asking permission even for small actions, assuming that the priest must control everything, and a tendency to *'look after'* priests, implying that they can't look after themselves. One active and experienced woman said:

I can only speak for myself, but I can see that I should be different, sometimes it's easy to slip in the, to the role of baking a cake for the priest or, you know, looking after and I've got, I, as a person, I think I tend to be someone who cares for others. And I need, I need to reflect on how I am with a, with the priests in that way.

There is a contradiction here. The priest is seen as powerful and holy, but also as somewhat fragile, in need of protection from ordinary adult responsibilities. Within this contradiction, it may be difficult for a priest simply to be human and mature as an adult and also prone to make mistakes like anyone else. Yet several voices affirmed strongly that this is what people in parish communities would like; to see and experience all priests in their real humanity as flawed and vulnerable. There were several testimonies in the data of how relationships between priests and people become mutually supportive and deeply human when priests are able to let their vulnerability be seen or sensed. One priest who had been involved in safeguarding work described what happened after he had handled some difficult media work related to a local case and then returned to his own parish:

I was stood at the back of church, as people were going out ... and some people were just, they'd just touch your arm as they were going past and they couldn't look at you, you know, they just wanted to express something of their care really.



There were several testimonies in the data of how relationships between priests and people become mutually supportive and deeply human when priests are able to let their vulnerability be seen or sensed.



In older generations and in Catholic culture of the past, clericalism led to habits of adulation, almost venerating the priest. Adulation, importantly, is both given and received. Such habits were and perhaps still are bolstered by a sense of the priest's separateness, his lengthy formation in a semi-monastic institution and his presbytery housing. To some, priests' lifestyle, and particularly their formation in seminaries, indicates a lack of contact with the ordinary realities of finding employment, the cost of living and the demands of family life. When our habits and attitudes treat priests as 'special', as exceptional, unlike the rest of the baptised who live ordinary lives, it is not surprising that this also leads to a sense of entitlement or privilege in some priests. A priest from a religious order commented: *'Whenever you visited a seminary, you know, saw clergy behaving in a particularly entitled kind of way, you just looked at them and thought, Oh gosh, that's not, that's really unhealthy.'*

Habits of deference and perceptions of priests as special and different are unhelpful and limiting for priests as well as laypeople. Some feel what one religious described as 'the weight of inadequacy' because they are expected to live up to the ideal. It is hard for priests to break the habits of clericalism alone. Clericalist attitudes and behaviours are intricately embedded in how diocesan and parish life is organised. Even when priests try to resist assumptions that they alone are in charge, or know everything, or should decide everything, they may encounter resistance. A retired priest described going to celebrate Mass as a supply priest and being asked how he wanted to arrange things, since the assumption was that Mass should be celebrated as the priest wishes, whatever the custom and practice of the parish he visits. He asked to celebrate according to local custom, to do whatever the parish normally does.

Dismantling the default of clericalism

Several of the priests who spoke to us described the ways they try personally to dismantle or avoid the habits and relationships associated with clericalism:

For example, I very rarely wear a collar, I've never ever had anybody ask me, well where's your collar? Why do you not wear a collar, Father? And it's like, you just accept that well, this is [name] like, you know, and it's, many people call me [name], rather than Father [name], but I take both obviously, which is great, and when people ever do complain at that, so well that's my name mum and dad chose for me, so that's okay for me as well.

I don't automatically assume that they should call me Father, and the reason why I feel that is because that has to be earned, they have to get to know me as I am, and then they'll choose whether or not they're going to call me Father or not.

Many priests would welcome the dialogue that could happen if we could all break the habits associated with clericalism; their relationships and growth are impoverished as well as those of the wider community of faith.

One other particular theme related to clericalism also emerged in the voices that spoke to us, illustrating how clericalism is still the default



Many priests would welcome the dialogue that could happen if we could all break the habits associated with clericalism; their relationships and growth are impoverished as well as those of the wider community of faith.





Clericalism is a problem of and for the whole Church, the entire Catholic community.



assumption in parish life. This is the longstanding problem of what happens when the priest in a parish moves and a new one arrives. A new priest may work in quite a different way, celebrate liturgy differently and dismantle long established practices. The message given and absorbed is that the priest has all the power and the parish belongs to him. One woman described a distressing episode:

He came to our parish, arrived, there he was, his spirituality was utterly different from the priest that we had had before. His notion of anything collaborative was simply not there and there was one particular occasion where he'd said from the pulpit that whenever people came forward, they should genuflect. And like most parishes, elderly parish, lots of elderly people, and we had, at that point, two elderly religious sisters and he'd kind of said, as a throwaway, I think, at the end, if anybody's got any problems with it, come and see me afterwards. Lots of people had problems with it. These two religious sisters came to speak to him, and we could hear him shouting, 'I am your spiritual father; you will do as I say'.

The habit of accepting this message, of assuming power is centralised in the priest, lies at the heart of how clericalism is sustained in parish life. Reactions vary; *'some people think, oh well, you know, that's just how he is'*, one layperson said. A religious suggested another kind of response: *'If we didn't like them, we just didn't talk to them or if we got fed up with them, we just avoided them.'* Others want to take responsibility and raise concerns, but *'there isn't a clear route'*. Some do try to give constructive and honest feedback in a diplomatic way but don't feel that this helps. In the voices that spoke about this, including several women who were theologically informed and very active in the Church, there was a weary resignation.

The loss when a new priest comes is particularly acute when a parish has been directly affected by an abuse case or experienced a difficult re-organisation. One laywoman described it:

People coming in don't know that journey. They really don't know the pain, the positives, the work, they don't know that, so to go to making decisions without, and this is what we're going to do, that's disrespecting that and ... the phrase I keep hearing from possibly ten or twelve people is, 'but we're here, they come and go'.

There are many habits, structures and practices which still give the message that the parish belongs to the priest, that he is in charge and must decide everything. This is fertile ground for attitudes which diminish the baptismal responsibility of laypeople and limit the sense that the whole community is responsible for its own life and mission. This concern is of much wider relevance than the issues of abuse and mishandling explored in this research; but it matters specifically in relation to how we need to transform culture and relationships in the light of the abuse crisis.

Clericalism is a problem of and for the whole Church, the entire Catholic community. It is not only the responsibility of priests and bishops to solve. It needs changes of attitude and intentional changes in habits from both laypeople and priests. As one religious woman noted; *'We're absolutely programmed and it will take generations.'* A priest added a further comment: *'It's very important to, to understand that that system only survived because there was something in it for the laity as well'.*

Clericalism is embedded in Catholic culture and also in our structures and systems, which in turn reflect what we believe about the Church as a whole baptised body and its ministry. The attitudes and beliefs about priesthood in particular point to the need to re-examine the theology of priesthood to see whether some of the roots of clericalism are found there. Chapter Seven explores this further.

4. ■ Bystander perspectives

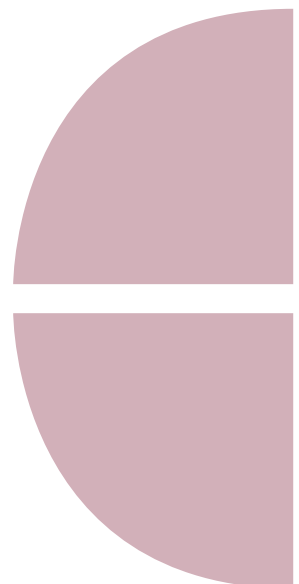
When a parish or religious community has been directly affected by a case of clerical child abuse or a related offence, often both people and priests within and beyond that community ask themselves searching questions. Did I see or suspect anything? Was there anything that made me uncomfortable? What should I have done? Sometimes people realise afterwards that they knew something was not right, but they didn't know clearly enough what that was. Or they may have no idea how to speak about their intuition or to whom, or whether it is proper to do so. For some it then becomes a matter of conscience; do I bear some of the responsibility because there might be something I should have done? These feelings persist, sometimes for many years, indicating how the impact of the abuse crisis endures.

This is not the only reaction likely to happen. As discussed earlier, some simply prefer to avoid the issue and would rather not know or speak about it. Others find themselves unable to believe that a priest whom they knew and whose ministry they saw is guilty of whatever abuse has been alleged, especially if the allegation relates to an earlier time period or a different place. The range of reactions can be diverse and sometimes divisive and painful for a parish or community. All these responses were found among our research participants.

Survivors ask related questions. They wonder whether people who were active in the place they were abused noticed anything or knew anything about the priest or other persons who abused them. They wonder why it was allowed to happen, and it matters very much to know whether Church authorities were aware and could or should have acted to prevent the abuse.

A perspective that can be useful here is the idea of being bystanders. There is a body of research which has examined how people respond when some grievous harm is being done in their midst. This research is concerned to understand why people do not act when they see wrong being done, reflecting on atrocities such as the Holocaust or genocide. There is a continuum of ways of describing a bystander:

- Someone who does not know that harm is happening but who is part of a wider culture that is implicated in allowing that harm.
- Someone who does not know for sure that harm is happening, but suspects something is wrong.
- Someone who refuses to believe or to see or interpret signs of inappropriate behaviour.



- Someone who knows something but does not know how to act or feel able to act.
- Someone who does raise questions or act in some way but is not believed.

For the theologian Elisabeth T. Vasko, a bystander is someone who behaves with what she terms ‘unethical passivity’ in the face of suffering or violence.⁷² In other words, this means someone who is implicated by proximity or by knowing and could or should have acted.

The question raised here is whether some or all of us have been, or possibly still are, bystanders, either to specific cases of abuse in places we know or to the collective experience of knowing that clerical child abuse has happened in our dioceses, schools and parishes. If we collude with relationships and habits that maintain silences or promote clericalism, are we implicated in a culture that has failed to act rightly when harm is being done in cases of abuse and in poor institutional response to victims and survivors?

This is not an easy area for reflection. Some ‘bystanders’ may be parents or family members of victims or those who carry anxieties about their own children when a priest they know has offended. They are also secondary victims of the abuse. One survivor reflected on how his own parents might have felt when he disclosed that he had been abused because they let their son be taken away for a night by a priest who then raped him. Many years later, he is still not sure what they thought: *‘I still don’t think that they fully took on board what had happened.’* A grandparent in another parish from which a priest had been imprisoned worried about her grandsons, especially when her daughter, their mother, asked *‘how do we know nothing’s happened to the boys?’* Others were not so close to a case of abuse, but still felt caught up in it and may be affected in ways they do not even notice. It is hard to say whether those who are secondary victims are also bystanders, that is, people who perhaps could have acted differently. But it is worth asking whether our habitual attitudes towards priests might have worked against parents’ and parishioners’ instincts about their children’s safety.

There is no objective ‘view from nowhere’ in relation to whether any of us are bystanders or not. A bishop who spoke in this research commented that most bishops and priests see themselves as innocent bystanders who feel resentment about offending priests. Others think that bishops and clergy are bystanders who could have acted to prevent some abuse earlier or to respond more actively to affected communities. This was an example of starkly different perspectives which make a complex picture.

Feeling complicit: unwitting and unwilling collusion

I think I feel complicit not at a personal level because actually I wasn’t aware of it probably in all of those settings I’ve been in; it’s only afterwards that I’ve become aware... It’s only looking back on it, you can see, oh yeah, that behaviour was this. I think I feel complicit because I’ve been part of a system which has formed me and is sinful yes, systemic sin, it is; it’s formed me in a way which is less than wholesome and certainly doesn’t keep, lead to wholeness and growth



a bystander is someone who behaves with what she terms ‘unethical passivity’ in the face of suffering or violence.



and life to the full and isn't about using your gifts and talents and that transformation, communion, unity. So, I think I felt complicit in the sense that I'm part of a system, which is abusive.

None of us want to feel that we have been complicit in any way with the wound of child abuse. Many will understandably feel that they are innocent and have a clear conscience. Others will justify not acting by saying they didn't actually know anything, or that there were no procedures in place at the time when the abuse took place some time ago. But it is worth considering whether we all share a degree of collective complicity. It may be unwitting and often unwilling collusion with clericalism or the habit of silence or of preferring not to ask awkward questions; but can we say there is nothing we could have done? In Pope Francis' call for conversion of hearts in response to the child abuse crisis, there is a dynamic of repentance involved, a recognition that there are habits and patterns we need to change.

Some of those who spoke to us, including some priests in particular, did examine their consciences and ask themselves whether they now bear some responsibility for what happened or for not acting. A priest whose former colleague had been imprisoned for a sexual offence described serious reflection leading to a clear conscience:

Did I ever think this would happen, you know, do I ever think, yeah, was there something I missed? Yeah, I've gone through all of that. And I'm quite happy now that there wasn't anything I missed, and I never thought [the offending priest] was a danger to children. Or indeed, you know, a sexual predator in any shape or form.

But another priest described observing small actions in relation to dressing altar servers that concerned him, observing in retrospect that *'you feel slightly guilty in not doing anything at the time'*. One younger person wondered how *'good guys'* should respond when they discover things have been brushed under the carpet – what does a 'good' response to this look like?

One other dynamic is relevant here, further connecting questions about bystanders with clericalism. Some of those who spoke to us explained that what prevented them from acting was the sense that they had no power to do so or no language they could use. Some might also have been schooled in a sense that it was wrong to bring scandal to the Church. This may reflect structures and attitudes that expect obedience, in religious communities for example, or in priests' relationships with their bishops. For laypeople in a parish, the sense of powerlessness is pervasive.

The Church as a collective bystander

Considering whether and how we are bystanders also helps us to see that clerical child abuse is never just a matter of a victim and a perpetrator. It always happens in a context where there are other people and where there are structures and systems operating which influence attitudes, relationships and habits. It may be that the institution of the Church has been a collective bystander, with too many examples of unethical passivity in the face of the suffering and trauma of victims and survivors.



In Pope Francis' call for conversion of hearts in response to the child abuse crisis, there is a dynamic of repentance involved, a recognition that there are habits and patterns we need to change.





There is a delicate balance to be found between an appropriate examination of conscience, individually or communally, and a recognition of constraints and habits which we did not create but which are likely to have influenced us all.



It is helpful that there are bishops willing to acknowledge this. In September 2022, for example, the US Catholic Bishops spoke about the ‘enduring wounds’ suffered by the laity as a result of clerical abuse. They acknowledge that ‘many of these wounds have been inflicted not only by individual members of the Church but often by the institution itself.’⁷³ Passive bystanding may be a habit or behaviour we learn or somehow absorb unconsciously in the Catholic Church in the systems, structures and cultures that reward obedience to authority and loyalty to superiors. Whilst the official teaching of the Church proposes that all the baptised share responsibility for its life and mission, the practical reality at parish level communicates a different message when power and decision-making is firmly in clerical hands and there are few spaces in which laypeople can raise questions.

One further perspective on this issue was helpful. We have already quoted a leader of a male religious congregation who spoke strongly to affirm that *‘most people have done absolutely nothing wrong’* and should not feel either guilty or paralysed. There is shame to be borne and acknowledged, he said, but *‘it’s important that we don’t let the toxicity of this thing leak into places where it doesn’t belong’*. We should avoid expecting people to take on blame when they have no real guilt to bear. There is a delicate balance to be found between an appropriate examination of conscience, individually or communally, and a recognition of constraints and habits which we did not create but which are likely to have influenced us all.

5. Accountability and support for priests

Each of the themes considered so far in this chapter leads to questions about accountability. Silences support the denial of accountability. Clericalism avoids or rejects what is proposed in accountability. And questions about complicity and whether we are bystanders point to the need to ask about accountability. The issue of accountability emerged as one of the strongest themes in this research. Fully a quarter of those we interviewed pointed to the lack of accountability in the culture and structures of the Church both for priests and for bishops.⁷⁴ Those speaking included priests, laypeople, and safeguarding staff as well as those who work in seminaries.

Comments on this theme often connected several ideas relating to processes that would support healthy relationships and ministry. Many of the voices we heard described how support and accountability are linked and enable each other. If good support is in place, accountability becomes possible. Conversely, if accountability is expected without the offer and availability of support, it is alienating.

Priests told us about the informal ways they found support, often from close friends and family members, or from parishioners. One priest said *‘I have never ever not felt really supported, as a priest, in a way where I feel quite amazed and humbled by it, so that’s what’s allowed me to face my own struggles with it and work through stuff.’* Some find a mentor.

Practices of support and accountability

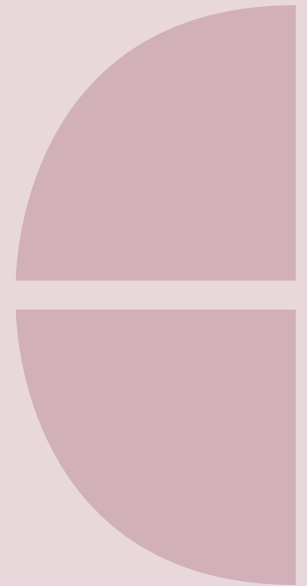
It matters to be clear what we mean by accountability for any particular group. Here we focus on accountability for those in ordained ministry, whilst recognising that accountability is also relevant for other members of the Church, personally and in roles and ministries.

There are several overlapping practices to consider, each of which combines elements of support and accountability.

- Spiritual direction, which involves regular meetings with a spiritual director who listens and accompanies someone who is seeking to deepen their relationship with God in whatever context they live and work. Several priests and bishops talked about their primary sense of accountability to God and the value of this kind of support. One priest explained that *'my safeguard has been then to seek out and find, right through my life, a sound spiritual director to bounce everything off and, and without that, I'd have been completely up the swanny'*. It is usually left to priests themselves to decide whether or not to seek spiritual direction and to find the right person.
- Supervision understood in the pastoral or clinical sense, as a space in which someone involved in ministry, whether ordained or not, can reflect on aspects of their work with a skilled professional supervisor in order to understand better what is happening and how it affects their well-being. Some priests and bishops seek this kind of supervision and others do not. As one safeguarding professional noted, *'there's no sanction if you don't.'* A priest who does engage in supervision described his experience:

I found that a benefit, really beneficial but that's at my level, finding that, you know, to go and be able to say to someone, I'm struggling with this situation, I'm struggling to because... and they used to say 'and how does it make you feel?' and explore the feelings that go with it... I personally think it's invaluable.

- Two bishops also described how this kind of accompaniment was helpful and important, even if only taken up for a period or in relation to particular challenges.
- Supervision understood as a line management practice, in which there is a focus on what is being achieved in a person's work, including difficulties and challenges, and what skills the person might need to develop or strengthen. The absence of line management was a major concern expressed in our data and is discussed further below. Both laypeople and priests spoke about the absence of line management for priests and bishops.
- Appraisal understood as regular, usually annual, review of experience and achievement with an appropriate reviewer. This was not explicitly mentioned in our data although it is implicit in line management. The idea that appraisal might be valuable for those in ordained ministry has been discussed periodically among priests. In the 1990s, the National Conference of Priests asked the Bishops' Conference to develop an appraisal model which led to a report titled *Supporting Ministry*. The report set out three models of appraisal or review that could be adopted by dioceses. There is no published data about whether the models of appraisal have been used or whether any diocese recommends or enables a practice of appraisal for priests.



Others join a mutual support group, which may be linked to a spirituality or another programme. A member of a group of this kind explained the value:

We can't sit and debate what priests in general need, unless we're prepared to be honest about what our own needs and vulnerabilities are and that's what set the tone.. it is a space where we can be honest with one another.

Accountability and priests

The data indicates two areas of accountability which were seen as closely implicated in how abuse and its mishandling happened and how growth to maturity in the Catholic community is still impeded.

The first area is concerned with supervision understood as line management. This concerns what a priest does in his active ministry. It is the least discussed and developed area of how ordained ministry operates in parishes and the aspect of accountability that came up most often in our interviews. A parish safeguarding representative, for example, identified an absence of *'performance management'*, where *'people are watched and have supervision chats with their line manager'*, as happens in other professions. Many laypeople find it hard to understand, that a priest can be left so alone.

Priests themselves were particularly direct: *'I think we're the least monitored, least controlled, least supervised group of people in the whole world'*, one said. For a current parish priest, *'I'm not held to account here at all. No one holds me to account. .. If I was being dysfunctional, no one tells me.'* This leads to a lack of direction and oversight: *'no-one investing time in seeing how you're doing'*; and also a lack of challenge: *'We can get away with a lot of less than acceptable standards of behaviour'*, another priest said, posing a question: *'So what does it mean for priests to be professional and to have some sort of professional code of conduct?'*

This is also seen as failure of care. As one priest notes, some degree of challenge is *'for the greater well-being of the priest himself'*. The lack of mechanisms such as appraisal limits awareness of what kind of development in ministry or skills an individual might need. Some voices, both lay and ordained, point out that appraisal is commonplace elsewhere. Many laypeople work in organisations where accountability is expressed in management and appraisal structures and notice their absence in diocesan life.

The absence of practical structures of accountability creates risk not only to standards of ministry, but also to the priest's own sense of identity and capacity to flourish safely. A young priest spoke of the risk that priests become 'lone rangers', isolated and 'self-referential', so that destructive patterns of behaviour become more alluring and may take hold. A deacon felt that this absence deepens vulnerabilities, and priests may not then be able to find the right support and supervision to understand their experience and needs. The data also clearly reports that many priests feel a lack of support and of 'nurturing'. An experienced priest observed: *'I think we've always known, from the day I was ordained, if you need help, don't go asking, because you won't get it, you won't find it, you've got to sort your own help out.'*

Accountability upwards

Both priests and laypeople puzzled over the idea that a diocesan priest is accountable to his bishop. In theory this is where accountability lies, but no-one who spoke to us thought that it worked well in practice. A priest with experience in industry commented that this relationship does not enable either challenge or care, and that difficult issues are often not followed up. He pointed out that a bishop has to understand his priests as people, get to know their lives and what's happening for them, as it might explain challenging behaviour, and then they can be helped. But, he felt, no effort is made to do this, and the priests are not open with the bishop or with each other. A priest in another diocese said that when challenged, his own bishop takes great offence and relies on his authority and power rather than building relationships with and earning the respect of his priests.

Bishops themselves seem only too aware of how they may be perceived by their priests. One shared what he had noticed in his relationship with his priests: that they answer the phone differently if they know it's him and their tone changes suddenly; that priests don't tell their bishops things; he knows they are guarded around him and don't tell the truth. The priests in his diocese are not keen to pray with him and are only willing to say formulaic, set prayers when they pray together; they do not want to be open or to pray from the heart in front of him, which he interprets as a lack of trust. He felt that priests view their bishop rather like an Ofsted inspector in that the best view of him is the taillights of the car going down the road. They feel only relief when he has gone.

The relationship between priests and bishops has multiple dimensions. There is a formal expectation of obedience, but as one priest commented, *'it doesn't play a huge part in our lives'*, other than when priests are asked to move to a different parish or ministry. The bishop is expected to oversee the spiritual well-being of priests, but in practice, priests decide for themselves whether to find a spiritual director or to find someone to provide supportive supervision in relation to their ministry, or indeed to undertake some counselling or therapy. It is not surprising that priests feel they are alone in navigating their own growth and the challenges they encounter in ministry.

This is also a wider perspective here. A religious priest observed that *'so much of the authority of the Church is unaccountable and that's hugely problematic... when you're dealing with authority which can itself be quite abusive'*. This is an illuminating comment. If priests do not see that accountability is a practice and culture at all levels of the Church, it will be more difficult to build a healthy practice of accountability at local parish level. There may be anger or frustration that they do not experience any downwards accountability from bishops, or when they see that bishops do not seem to be accountable upwards in any practical or structured way.

Accountability of priests to each other

The lack of clear practices in relation to upwards accountability also means that a culture of mutual accountability between priests is unlikely or difficult to develop. Priests themselves sometimes see dysfunctional behaviour in other priests; but as one priest notes, there are no systems



If priests do not see that accountability is a practice and culture at all levels of the Church, it will be more difficult to build a healthy practice of accountability at local parish level.



to enable this to be raised:

Where do you take that? ... it's not my responsibility, I don't line manage them, I'm not pastorally or ecclesiologically responsible for them but we all know it goes on still, dysfunctional behaviour and no one telling.

It is not only individual priests whose behaviour may become dysfunctional. The diocesan structures currently in place may also fail to support or enable accountability. Two other priests commented on the deanery structure; one described deanery meetings as *'a farce'*, with *'no genuine meeting of people'* and undercurrents of division and *'a felt lack of respect from some'* for racial or ethnic difference. Another priest who had just been appointed as a dean explained a current expectation that deanery meetings should work as a support group where *'we're all opening up to one another'*, yet *'I've been a priest for 30 years and very little of that's occurred'*. But there is potential here. A skilled lay professional who described deans as *'disempowered'* by the sexual abuse crisis commented *'I think our deans have got to become managerial, they've got to become empowered. We need to excite them, we need to communicate well with them and we need to empower them'*.

Accountability to the community of faith

The second area where accountability lacks practical expression concerns the priest's relationship with the communities he serves. This could be described as accountability outwards, a kind of accountability that can be expressed in ordinary habits and behaviour as well as practical structures or processes. Several laypeople described what they found lacking. When they have concerns about behaviour or want to ask a priest to explain or justify a decision,

there isn't a clear route...there's not a process or a system where parishioners can bring, you know, a concern, put that it way, a concern, a complaint in a way that they know it will be systematically and fairly formally addressed.

The issue of what happens when a new priest comes to a parish was raised again here. A deacon commented that *'one priest is in a parish for ten years, and moves on and the next guy comes in, can just, at a whim, stop everything, change everything, do something completely different and, and you think, is that right?'*

This is not a new concern. *Supporting Ministry*, the report mentioned earlier, which was published in 1999 by the Bishops' Conference, was a result of a request from priests themselves to address this. The report gave a description of what accountability means:

a priests' or deacon's duty to be responsible to God and others for using his gifts and talents in his ministry, office and other tasks entrusted to him.⁷⁵

The 'others' are primarily the bishop, to whom he is 'directly responsible'.

The report then adds:

In the wider sense, accountability includes giving explanations to those for whom his ministry and/or office make him responsible. Modern examples include a reasonable expectation that a new parish priest will respect the present arrangements in the parish and also its legitimate differences from his previous experience.

More recently in 2020 the Bishops' Conference issued *Caring Safely for Others: Pastoral Standards and Safe Conduct in Ministry (CSFO)*. The introduction includes a strong statement on accountability:

Similarly, although bishops, priests and deacons do not hold public office, they do hold ecclesiastical offices and exercise pastoral ministries which are public in nature. Holders of public office are 'accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office' (Nolan). In the same way, clergy must be prepared to be held accountable for their conduct and aspire to observe the highest standards of behaviour in the exercise of their ministry.⁷⁶

These texts point us towards a larger understanding of accountability as concerned with relationships and habits as well as structures. Practices such as supervision meetings and annual reviews will work more effectively if they are part of a wider culture which creates and supports everyday habits that signal accountability. The standards set out in *Caring Safely for Others* to ensure good safeguarding practice are explicit about what this means in practice. In a standard concerned with the need for partnership between clergy and lay safeguarding staff and volunteers in relation to safeguarding ministry, for example, we read:

This requires that we:

Stand ready to be held to account, and hold to account those with whom we collaborate, for the way we exercise our safeguarding ministry. This requires that we:

- a. Be willing to accept questions or criticism regarding the good practice of our safeguarding ministry.
- b. Be willing to question or challenge our lay collaborators regarding their good practice in the work of safeguarding children and adults at risk.

If these habits of accountability matter in regard to safeguarding, surely they also need to be practiced in parish life and ministry more generally? It will not be effective to try to create a different culture only around safeguarding awareness and practice. The attitudes, habits and behaviours that express and invite accountability need to be found across all aspects of parish life. As *Caring Safely for Others* indicates, the aspiration is also for a culture in which accountability is mutual, between those who are ordained and other members of the baptised.

So how might this happen? How does a priest, or a parish team member or lay leader, begin to move parish cultures in this direction? There are many small behaviours and signals that can contribute. There is also a need for stronger leadership and possibly for experimentation. This is explored further in Chapter Eight.

Signs of hope and progress

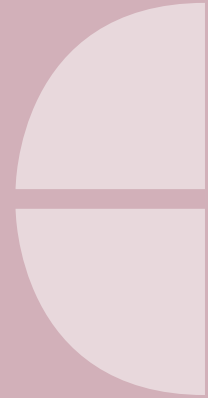
There are signs of hope and progress. Two seminary staff members described their awareness of the need for accountability and for *'building in also structures of support and accountability and mentoring and which, as yet, aren't built in in a systemic sort of way.'* A priest who worked in a seminary reflected:

To be our best, for people, as priests, we have to know that we are accountable to people and that's accountable in the most positive, wholesome, whatever those sorts of words we want to throw into it, accountable in that best and most wholesome way to people and I think that's what really is the most important thing that, in formation, we try to get across is, we are accountable.

The same priest suggested that current diocesan re-organisation strategies made necessary because there are fewer priests would lead to *'completely new and embedded support and accountability'*. A parish priest described actions taken in relation to a case of an imprisoned priest that reflected a clear sense of accountability to the parish community and the pastoral team, not just other clergy. Putting accountability structures in place protects priests. One priest commented on how the most recent reforms to safeguarding practice have rigorous accountability built in, which enables priests to feel safer and more confident about what they should be doing. Another priest connected the need for accountability structures even more directly to child abuse and safeguarding, seeing it as a fundamental part of the cultural change that is needed alongside policies and procedures.

A further sign of progress is the development of wider access for priests to skilled professionals who can offer what is termed 'pastoral accompaniment'. One professional working in this field described this concept as 'the way forward', a model which avoids perceptions of power bearing down on individuals from hierarchical office-holders. Rather, it frames the process in a collegial way in relation to ministry. Pastoral accompaniment assists anyone in ministry to be accountable first of all to themselves.

The need for practical expressions of accountability for priests is evident in the testimony of priests themselves as well as in the aspirations and needs of the communities they serve. There is growing recognition of its importance, yet progress towards putting in place practical mechanisms remains slow and piecemeal. It is worth reflecting on what prevents or inhibits us from moving in this direction. It may partly be the case that accountability seems an alien concept to the life of the Church, something taken up from secular disciplines and management theory. If so, then part of the answer may be in finding the theological rationale and framework for the relationships we desire and aspire to in the Church, a task taken up in the next chapter.



The JP2 Directory

The JP2 Directory contains details of the members of the JP2 Network, 'a community of counselling professionals who are interested in growing together, both personally and professionally, with a focus on the Catholic faith, its spirituality and understanding the needs of its clergy.' The network, which was founded in 2015, promotes 'pastoral accompaniment, sometimes called pastoral supervision, as well as providing counselling services'. Each part of the network is co-ordinated locally by participating dioceses and brought together in a central directory in which details of network members are listed. See **The JP2 Directory** <https://jp2directory.org/about/>

6. Hierarchy, accountability and leadership

Questions about accountability were also raised in relation to bishops, both by bishops themselves and by laypeople and priests. It is clear from this research and from wider literature that the abuse crisis has sharpened a focus on how authority and power work in the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. The extensive accounts of mishandling and failure in response to victims and survivors in many different countries point towards issues of leadership and accountability at the episcopal level as well as in the parish.⁷⁷

In Chapter Three, we described the complexity and difficulties bishops experience in this area, some of which point directly to issues of structure and theology. In this section, we look briefly at the perceptions of bishops and of other members of the Church in relation to accountability and leadership and the culture and systems in which these are embedded.

The perspective of bishops

The bishops who spoke to us described multiple accountabilities: to the Pope; to the Holy See including through the ad limina visit; and to the people and clergy of their dioceses.⁷⁸ One bishop added his legal accountability to charity law as a diocesan trustee. But two of the bishops also recognised that whilst they may feel accountable, it is difficult to know what this means in practice. For one bishop, *'there aren't many mechanisms for actually being answerable... we don't have any mechanisms or processes for the exercise, to display that accountability'*. Although the ad limina system is a formal process, they did not see this as an effective mechanism.⁷⁹ For one of the bishops, it is *'so stylized and carefully constructed that I don't think it is real accountability'*. In contrast, he added, his *'real accountability'* is *'not a system or a structure, it's my choice, is to my spiritual director'* and to a professional colleague who provides skilled accompaniment.

Another bishop pointed out that whether or not systems of accountability are in place, people in his diocese do give him feedback: *'they're very quick to write in and tell me what they think'*. He spoke of the need to ensure that curial staff work with local parish communities when decisions are being made: *'we're their servants, not the other way round'*. But he saw the need for change:

What's got to change, I think ... there's got to be some sense of, I wouldn't say external accountability, I don't know what I mean exactly, I don't have a model for that but it cannot be that the bishop gets to decide, chapter and verse, on everything in the diocese, in the sense, in that way, without any sense of being accountable to somebody else.

A third bishop gave another perspective, explaining that what matters to him is to have trustees and other advisers who will challenge him and describing his willingness to listen. There were other voices



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affirming that challenge and other aspects of mutual accountability do operate between bishops and their key advisers and between bishops themselves. 'They do use each other as a mutual support network but they're also not afraid to challenge each other either', a professional diocesan office-holder confirmed. But if this is the case for some or indeed most bishops, it is not visible to people or priests outside those inner circles and in the perception of those outside the episcopal institutional structures, bishops are the sole decision-makers.

How are bishops accountable?

A range of voices puzzled over this question. A lay safeguarding representative asked, *'Who manages the bishop then? if you're a social worker or if you're a health worker, there's the chain, isn't there? So somebody is performance managing everybody.'* A priest's perception was that *'each bishop is king of his own castle, so each bishop has absolute control, in his diocese.'* This was echoed by a female religious with leadership experience who pointed out *'there is no accountability to anybody else, except upwards.'*¹⁸⁰ For others, usually laypeople or priests who desire a more equal and unclerical Church, concern focused on how bishops exercise the power given to them in canon law. They described experiences of decisions being taken that affected them without any sense that consultation and listening had happened. Two voices, from a woman and a religious priest, gave the example of the decision about a different Scripture translation to be used in Mass, a translation which they understood does not have inclusive language. A deacon identified an *'authoritarian streak'*, experienced when bishops make decisions affecting the community of faith without consultation. This may be with the best of intentions, he observed, *'but you just think, what's that all about?'*

In these and other comments, practical dimensions of what is missing and needed can be glimpsed. Transparency and good communication are absent or inadequate; there may be good reasons for particular decisions, but these are not explained. More significantly, there are no regular structured mechanisms through which those affected by decisions can raise concerns and enter dialogue either before or after decisions are made. The only channel left is individual letters or emails to bishops, which is not often a useful way to handle much of what matters to people, either for bishops or for those who are troubled. There is rarely any feedback, either at diocesan or national level, to enable the wider community of faith to feel that their views and concerns matter and have been taken seriously.

Several well-informed voices noted that the absence of accountability mechanisms had become particularly obvious in relation to safeguarding. Crucially, bishops were not accountable to their own safeguarding structures; *'we had no power to force them'*, a diocesan safeguarding adviser observed. The Elliott Review recognised this, commenting on the weakness of a relationship that was merely advisory:



More significantly, there are no regular structured mechanisms through which those affected by decisions can raise concerns and enter dialogue either before or after decisions are made.




However, the advice and guidance that was offered was not always followed, and no power or authority had been given to CSAS to insist that it was. This represented an obvious deficit in the existing structure that had previously been highlighted in the evidence presented, whilst the Church was subject to public scrutiny at the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.⁸¹

In the new safeguarding structures led by the CSSA, this should be different. The Elliott Review argued that the CSSA as a national agency should provide an independent audit and review function for dioceses and ‘would have to be empowered to undertake its role as a regulator. These powers would be given to it through a contractual relationship being established between it and those bodies that it provides a service to.’⁸² But the multiple sometimes conflicting roles and responsibilities that bishops hold in relation to safeguarding, victims and survivors, priests, offenders and others described in Chapter Two still remain and make it complicated to work out how to further strengthen accountability.


Culture and impunity

If accountability is absent, or invisible or ineffective, the perception grows that there is impunity for bishops, that they retain control of everything and are not obliged to explain anything. This may not be how bishops themselves see or experience their ministry, and it may in part reflect deep habits from earlier experience of Catholic culture rather than present realities, but it is still a problem. It is not simply the challenge of working out what ‘downwards’ accountability of bishops, both to their priests and to their diocesan community, might look like in practice. It is a matter of culture, of attitudes and habits which bolster the sense of the bishop as remote and powerful and which create a sense of impunity. It is also a matter of structure, an area where canon law plays a powerful role assigning immense power to bishops.⁸³

The experience of the child abuse crisis has brought this into fresh focus and also challenged and begun to dismantle it. We have witnessed IICSA, a statutory inquiry, calling Catholic bishops to account and making detailed public criticism of their leadership. There is also awareness that elsewhere in the Catholic Church, bishops have been asked to resign as a result of abuse or mishandling. In a particularly significant move, Pope Francis issued the *motu proprio* already mentioned, *Vos estis lux mundi*, a document extending canon law, which establishes how bishops and religious superiors are to be held accountable in relation to allegations of abuse and clarifies their obligation to report any abuse to relevant authorities.⁸⁴ Commenting on this and on a further change to canon law lifting the ‘pontifical secret’, the moral theologian James Keenan notes that ‘the canonical structures that assured the impunity of our episcopacy are slowly but surely being removed’.⁸⁵ More recently, the rapid and public way in which two investigations were pursued into the circumstances surrounding the resignation of the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle have demonstrated a new willingness to act when questions are raised about a bishop, at least when those questions concern safeguarding.



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Culture and leadership

The related question asked by many voices in this research is squarely about leadership. There was a strong sense from laypeople, religious and priests that the Catholic community in England and Wales has not had the leadership that they see as needed in the Church's response to child abuse. Many voices described what they longed for: *'leadership that can transform'; that is 'visionary, compassionate, strong and strategic'; 'more proactive and interested and curious about diving into the complexity'; 'adventurous and imaginative'*; and willing to say that change is needed. It also needs to be leadership that can admit failure. An older priest 'despaired' when, in his view, Cardinal Nichols was unable to be 'contrite and forthright' when the IICSA report came out. Some observe that the leadership they desire may involve some struggle with *'the system'*, with the pressures of the institutional role. In the words of one woman, we need bishops *'who won't be stamped out, who won't be smothered, who won't be killed by the system'*.

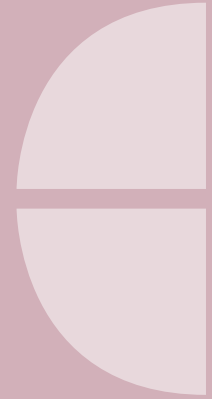
The last comment pinpoints what many see as the problem: the culture and institutional system that surrounds and structures episcopal leadership. A priest with wide experience summed this up well:

I think part of the problem is that those chosen for leadership, so to be bishops, it seems to me that the base of criteria is that you will support the system, so once you're in that, your job is to support, is the institution, ultimately, it's not primarily about the Gospel, that, it's about the institution.

Other voices expressed similar concerns: that the way bishops are chosen means *'you're not going to get anything radical from them'*. The priest quoted above noted that the confidential consultation form on candidates for the episcopacy used by the Papal Nuncio asks whether the candidate gives uncritical assent to the magisterium of the church. *'They will be obedient because they're chosen because of the way they think'*. For a theologian, this means most bishops *'have built up a sort of institutional identity and a sort of sense of who they're meant to be for the church and for the people.'* The concern expressed is that energy goes into conforming rather than pastoral leadership.

Some of those interviewed had experience of how the Bishops' Conference worked and how its culture discouraged the kind of leadership they would like to see. *'Everything's got to be decided across the board, so even any individual bishop who wants to go out on a limb slightly, you know, might find that quite difficult'*, one priest said. Another retired priest expressed concern that when bishops cannot come to *'a united voice'*, they don't say anything at all. A safeguarding professional thought that what is needed is *'an atmosphere where bishops can take their place at the table, speak their truth, without fear'*.

There are tensions in the perceptions here, tensions which bishops probably also experience. On one hand, they are seen as holding all the power, and some voices, including some survivors, cannot understand why they do not act more decisively when mishandling has happened or to enforce new policies. The perception is that the hierarchical structure



The Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle

Following the unexpected resignation of the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, Robert Byrne, the Archbishop of Liverpool, Malcolm McMahon OP, was asked by the Vatican Dicastery for Bishops to conduct a canonical investigation into the circumstances and the concerns raised within the diocese and in wider media. A summary of the report is found here [Canonical Investigation Report - Executive Summary - Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle \(diocesehn.org.uk\)](https://www.diocesehn.org.uk/canonical-investigation-report-executive-summary) although the full text has not been released. A further review carried out by the CSSA examined safeguarding practice in the diocese and has been published in full here [CSSA Safeguarding Review into the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle \(catholicsafeguarding.org.uk\)](https://www.catholicsafeguarding.org.uk/cssa-safeguarding-review-into-the-diocese-of-hexham-and-newcastle)

of the Church should ensure certain things happen. For example, some safeguarding staff ask why the chairman of the Bishops' Conference, currently Cardinal Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, cannot enforce action in other dioceses.⁸⁶ On the other hand, as noted above, some laypeople and priests desire a more participative and unclerical Church and lament the lack of effective consultation and genuine shared decision-making. They hope for a less authoritarian style of leadership.

In Catholic life in England and Wales, we do not often talk in mature, careful and serious ways about how we experience the leadership of our bishops, what we need and how we might grow into better habits and structures together. There have been almost no visible spaces in which such conversations could be initiated and structured to be generative and mutually supportive. The current exploration of synodality in our communal life which is discussed further in Chapter Eight may open some possible pathways. But the difficulties here are surely systemic; it is not just a case of creating a new structure of some kind. Cultural habits are also implicated, including those already discussed in this chapter. This is part of the 'practical and effective action' involved in the process of conversion that the crisis asks of us, and perhaps part of what the Spirit is teaching us.

Apologies and accountability

Many of the tensions surrounding how episcopal ministry is exercised and how it is perceived by others within the Catholic community and externally come into particular focus in relation to apologising to victims and survivors of abuse and to others affected by mishandling. Apologies occupy a sensitive space, holding various meanings. For some survivors, they matter as recognition of their experience, a further expression that they are believed. For others, they contribute towards a sense of justice or restoration by acknowledgement of a wrong done in which the institution as well as the perpetrator needs to take responsibility. For some, they are part of a path of encounter and possible healing.

What we learned from the data is that an apology is not just a matter of hearing the right words spoken. Some survivors described apologies that they found inauthentic. One female survivor described what she saw as an authentic response: someone who can *'kind of put hands on heart and say, actually we got that terribly wrong and we have some responsibility for reparation or whatever that looks like'*. Others described genuine encounters in which they felt believed and where they could feel the sorrow and humility of the person apologising.

Even when the apology comes from a leader who is not directly responsible as the abuse and/or mishandling may have happened in his diocese or congregation years before his time, it still makes an impact if it is human and pastoral. One survivor spoke of being *'very grateful'* for the apologies he had received. Another spoke of how he now saw the diocesan bishop with whom he had met as *'the top of the Church'*, indicating a new hierarchy of pastoral sensitivity. The bishop whom he described gave a crucial re-framing of the notion of apology in his reflections on encounters with survivors:



In Catholic life in England and Wales, we do not often talk in mature, careful and serious ways about how we experience the leadership of our bishops, what we need and how we might grow into better habits and structures together.



Only I could say to them, I have no right to expect this from you, but you have every right to hear from me that I ask your forgiveness. You have a right to be asked for that forgiveness, we have no right to expect it, but that has to be done with, by the Church and within the Church.

This comment offers a theological opening which is discussed in the next chapter. It also indicates another angle on the role and accountability of bishops and leaders of religious congregations. Victims and survivors, and probably also the wider community, need to hear from those in leadership roles, bishops and other office-holders, that they are accepting responsibility, not personally but on behalf of the body or institution of the Church.

It is not easy for bishops and other leaders to act as freely in this area as many would wish. One leader described it as *'very hard terrain for people to enter into correctly'*. Another acknowledged that *'it's about really feeling it and owning it and being transformed by it'*. As well as the pastoral and human qualities involved, bishops may receive advice from insurers about apologies that conflict with their pastoral instincts. One bishop described how he decided to act:

When I decided to make that apology, I didn't go and consult my diocesan insurers, I didn't, you know, it was my apology, not a carefully calculated worded or crafted to avoid any subsequent legal action, so the insurance didn't even know I'd done it. It was news to them. Some people may say that's foolhardy but for me, it's, it's the response that you make to, you know, a, a compassionate response.

There are also sometimes legal or procedural constraints, if an inquiry is underway or a legal process is taking place. Another bishop spoke of how these constraints were

contrary to all that I would have wished to do and be as a pastor, because my natural instinct in that setting would be to, just to reach out to them and to speak. But I knew I couldn't do [that], out of respect for them and the process.

Several bishops acknowledged that bishops have been fearful and cautious in the light of insurance advice and their responsibilities as trustees. A leader of a male religious congregation pointed out that once a legal process is happening, it is not possible to engage in contact and that can easily be interpreted by the person on the other side of the case as a refusal to engage.

Apologies do not only matter for victims and survivors. Others have also suffered undue hurt and pain from mishandling or from allegations which were later found to be without substance. One laywoman spoke of how she had felt deceived when she discovered that a former colleague, a priest, was not, as she had been given to think, absent through illness but rather on a treatment programme for sex offenders following allegations made against him. Two priests who had been accused and suspended but later returned to ministry both remained deeply hurt by what they had experienced.

7. Confession, forgiveness and justice

For Catholics, the sacraments are immensely important. They are central to our experience of faith and to our understanding of what it means to belong to the Catholic community. The teaching and disciplines of the Church in relation to sacraments have a profound impact on our lives, sometimes bringing pain and exclusion as well as drawing us deeply and joyfully into discipleship and community. Sacraments become surrounded or embedded in the culture of our families, parishes and communities, in our local habits and practices. This culture often still needs to be renewed or transformed despite the decades of changing practices since Vatican II, but this is a slow and variable process and older attitudes and habits often prevail or may be called back to attention.

In relation to the child abuse crisis, this research has found many ways in which cultural attitudes and practices connected to the sacrament of reconciliation have been unhelpful and sometimes have deepened the damage and pain. For some victims the sacrament itself, still familiarly known as ‘confession’, has been a site of further abuse. For others, survivors or those affected by a case in their parish or community, the experience raises questions about forgiveness, grace and reconciliation.

Some survivors described a distorted view of the sacrament that prevailed when they were children and explained how this deepened the harm of abuse. For one survivor, *‘God was out to get me, and it was about going to confession. But if you didn’t do your confession right, you wouldn’t be forgiven. I saw myself as a bad person, so then I just went to Mass every day to try and make myself good.’* When a child has this understanding, and is then abused by a priest, she feels even more at risk, often somehow at fault. God is seen as punitive and vengeful and there is little that communicates grace nor explains their innocence. The background Catholic culture in relation to this sacrament deepens the impact of abuse, adding a dimension of harm to the child’s spirit and soul.

Another survivor described an experience of the sacrament in which she tried to disclose abuse as an adult:

I made the mistake of [going] to confession and I told a priest and he put his hand over my head and said a prayer and he said, right, you’re healed now, off you go. And I felt so angry and I didn’t exactly feel abused again, it wasn’t that, but I just felt not listened to and kind of demeaned and pushed aside.

The sacrament of reconciliation is a privileged and utterly confidential space, but if used in this way, to close down a victim’s voice and communicate such a limited idea of how grace works, it is a misuse of the sacrament and a denial of its meaning.

Other voices expressed concerns about how forgiveness is understood in relation to priests who abuse. A seminary teacher commented: *‘There was a time when people thought he just goes ... and confesses his temptations and possibly even what he’s done and, with God’s help,*



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The sacrament of reconciliation is misused when grace and forgiveness are treated as transactional and seem to close down truthfulness and healing.



and a little time out of parish, he will be fine.' The teacher thought that *'we now know that's not the case'*, but others were not so confident. A survivor observed: *'the theology has said to him, once you ask for forgiveness, it's all sorted, so there's no social accountability, there's no in the real-world accountabilities.'* Forgiveness seems too easily given, without any sense of what was traditionally known as restitution and with little account taken of the traumatic impact of abuse. For another survivor, *'basically anybody that says mea culpa is almost, you know, given ten hail Marys and off you go, even if what you've actually done is something that should put you in jail for twenty years.'* When abuse is treated only as sin that can be forgiven, and not as a criminal act to be reported and handled through the justice system, victims become invisible and the full meaning and demands of forgiveness are obscured.

The questions about forgiveness raised by abuse concern us all. In our data, bishops, laypeople, priests and religious all spoke about their heart-searching on these issues. Should we forgive abusers? How do we make a moral evaluation when a priest who has abused has also ministered to individuals and communities in good and helpful ways? Catholics have a very strong sense of God's mercy as boundless; it is one of the experiences we desire to offer to people who are searching for faith or meaning. Yet it can make forgiveness seem superficial or empty if the way in which we speak about it is incommensurate to the harm done. In relation to survivors, the Catholic ethos of being forgiving can also add to a sense of oppression, that they are expected to forgive when they still feel unacknowledged or unhealed. A female survivor described being told by a priest that *'my problem is that I need to learn to forgive, and [he] sends me off with the wrong prayers to say and I don't trust in God enough'*.

The sacrament of reconciliation is misused when grace and forgiveness are treated as transactional and seem to close down truthfulness and healing. The conversion of hearts to which the abuse crisis calls the entire Catholic community is impeded when we do not have opportunities to explore how attitudes and habits related to confession, grace and forgiveness might be re-examined and expanded.

Justice and restoration

There is another perspective often omitted when we reflect on mercy, grace and forgiveness, one which connects to the themes of accountability and apologies discussed earlier. For many survivors, there is a profound sense of injustice done, both in the original abuse, and for some, in how Catholic institutions have mistreated them when they made allegations and asked for acknowledgement and redress. A male survivor who had been abused as an altar server by his parish priest reflected: *'I just thought, something's been, a wrong has been committed, there must be a process of where right is done and even, five, six years later, with the Church, I thought the same, like a fool.'*


The sense of injustice done is a driving force for some survivors. They want a wrong to be made right, not just for themselves, but for others. Hence the sense of mission that some feel, already described in Chapter Four. *'We've put a spirited campaign together to try and get justice*

for ourselves and for others that have been abused within the Catholic Church', a survivors' activism group explained, and 'more importantly to, you know, try and influence things into the future'. The words of a survivor activist are worth repeating: 'I think it's a mission really, it's something that I would want to engage in for the rest of my life'.

A sense of injustice associated with abuse does not only appear in the testimonies of survivors. Several women, lay and religious, described anger and outrage and a sense of being deceived or failed when cases of abuse were mishandled, when the truth is not shared about what has happened, and when *'people haven't resigned, when they should have done maybe or stepped aside.'* An accused and exonerated priest described the anger of parishioners at his treatment: *'some are no longer going to church, because they have found injustice in the church, some they just went to other parishes, instead of going in that church, where you have people who distribute communion and yet they do such things.'* And a priest who had held a leadership role in a religious congregation described an experience he found *'shaming'*, when his order made what he saw as a *'meagre'* pay-out to a victim, less than 10 per cent of the legal costs paid out: *'we wanted that justice be done, but boy did we fail'.*

These instincts are also born from and within Catholic culture and sacramental life. They point to a sense of connection between healing and justice, between forgiveness and restitution or some way of restoring what was taken. They reveal a sense of needing to be forgiven for failures, of office-holders feeling compelled to act to re-balance the moral relationship even when they are not personally responsible. They also illustrate again a tension between the standards and ideals of justice and generous compassion to which we might hold ourselves in the light of the Gospel and the way in which legal and fiduciary responsibilities exert other pressures. There are three realities in play which can be dissonant; the legal processes shaped by secular ideas of rights, criminality and redress; the more intuitive and sometimes elusive idea of *'natural justice'*; and the demands of the Gospel and an ethic of accompaniment and healing.

The Catholic Church has a deep attachment to the meaning of mercy and forgiveness and a powerful understanding of justice. Both concepts are crucially important in understanding what has happened to us in the abuse crisis, and what we need to learn from it, what the crisis is teaching us.



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8. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored some of the habits, attitudes and systemic ways of thinking and relating to each other in the Church which emerged as significant across the experience of all our research participants. They each shed some light on how we might respond to the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter and on what we need to learn, as a community of faith, in the light of the abuse crisis and the ways we have failed victims and survivors. They are also areas in which a process of discernment is needed, so that we might understand better where the Spirit is leading the Church. An analysis such as this, presented from empirical research, provides rich material for discernment, offering access to a depth of listening to a wide range of voices. But it is not the discernment process itself, however carefully and reflexively we have carried out our task as researchers.

Each of the themes discussed here prompts further questions,

- ***Can we unlearn habits of silencing and secrecy? Can we mutually challenge and change our collusion with clericalism?***
- ***Can we examine our consciences on whether we have been bystanders, individually and collectively, unethically passive in the face of this crisis?***
- ***Can we find mechanisms of practical accountability for priests and bishops, and places to describe and invite a different kind of leadership from bishops?***
- ***Can we understand better the demands of justice and the complexity of grace and forgiveness in relation to victims, survivors and others affected by this crisis?***

This report aims to invite and nourish the possibilities of such discernment and to indicate the questions that need to be asked. It does not have answers, although it does offer evidence and perspectives which may be useful.

There is also a question which runs across all these themes. Each in some way connects to aspects of our theological understanding. Each reveals a theology, sometimes a skewed or dysfunctional one. We have to ask whether the habits and ways of thinking discussed here come from our theology or whether in some way they reflect distortions or departures from our deepest theological understanding. There is a complex relationship between our theology, expressed in Catholic teaching, and the way we actually live and worship and interpret what our faith asks of us in our lives and our social worlds. But that does not mean we should avoid exploring it. If our theological understanding lies beneath some of the ways that our culture and habits have taken unhealthy or unhelpful directions, then our theology too needs to be explored. This task is begun in the next chapter.