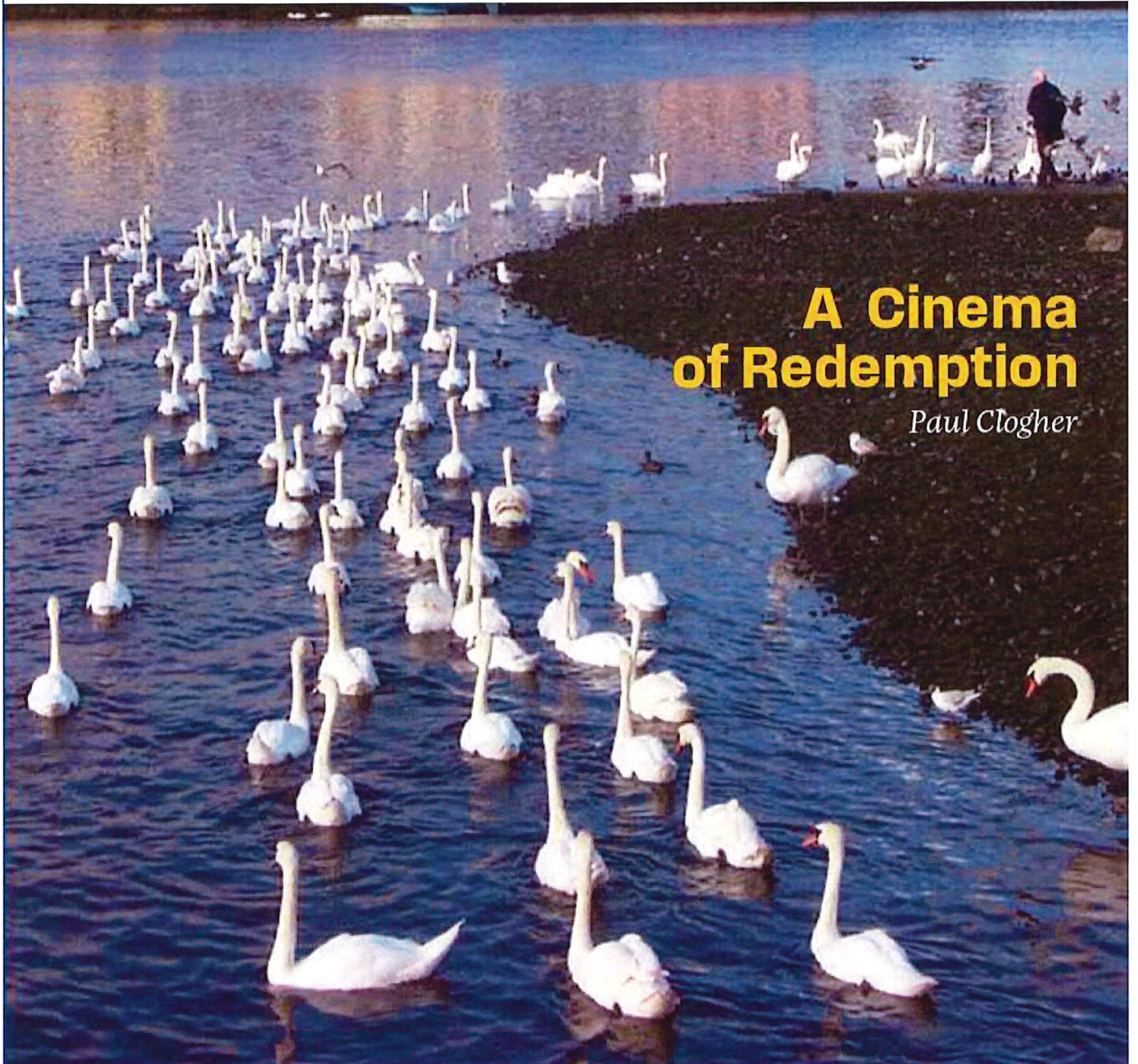


Conversations

Vol. 1 No. 2 March / April 2024 €7.50 £7.00



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Clerical Perpetrators of Child Abuse


The Dilemma of Spiritual Care

Johanna Merry

Both Church and State have been unambiguous in asserting paedophilic behaviours of clerical perpetrators a crime that does irreversible damage to the lives of children, unsettling in turn the faith community. Public outrage pressed for comprehensive safeguarding measures which are now in place, as are Church and statutory requirements for the protection of children/minors (persons under 18 years old). Identified perpetrators must now undergo risk assessment and be monitored in accordance with a customised Safety Plan. Notwithstanding these measures, behind the crime is a human person whose spiritual care and well-being should not be overlooked by the wider faith community.

We are learning that the root causes of paedophilia are complex, ambiguous and diagnosis-cautious; even with on-going scientific research, understanding remains nascent. Further, not all those who sexually abuse minors are paedophiles. Rather, some abusers act opportunistically or impulsively without a definitive sexual preference for children. (Researchers have suggested that only 50% of all individuals who sexually abuse children are paedophiles.)¹

1 For fuller discussion see *Front. Hum. Neuroscience*, 24 June 2015 Sec. Brain Health and Clinical Neuroscience. Volume 9 - 2015 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fn-hum.2015.00344>

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Recognition

We all have a public *persona* alongside a private self, known or not to others, but with which we ourselves have some familiarity. However, for the paedophile there is an apparent disconnect between the public *persona* they present and the private self that acts in deviant ways. Secondly, they are often approachable, affable role models, their contrary side discoverable only after disclosures of allegations of child sexual abuse are made ... evoking shock and disbelief, followed by loathing.

Further, perpetrators may have little awareness or readily grasp that their actions are wrong. Some may believe that their activities are normative, e.g., children benefit from their actions, while others can be manipulative, appearing to have a cunning understanding of their behaviour as socially unacceptable. Paedophilic orientations are perplexing.

Here I wish to focus on a pastoral ethos for the spiritual care of clerical perpetrators of child abuse. I ask what the role of the wider faith community is (or could be), offering some pastoral prompts for spiritual companions and/or prayer guides already in this ministry who may wish to further inform their interest or encourage dedicated training in this aspect of ministry.

Understanding

Christians believe in a God who 'lets the sun rise on the evil and the good...' (Mt 5:45); One who pursues and overtakes us when we stray, out of kindness, love and tender care (St Chrysostom, Homily 5 on Hebrews 2:16-17). As such we must ask ourselves how we can help perpetrators to move closer towards a God who holds nothing in abhorrence of what he has created, but desires all 'to live and flourish' (Wis 11:24-26).

In their attempt to explain paedophilia, clinicians conjecture that expected psycho-social sexual development deviates from the norm, becoming derailed, manifesting as a perversion or sickness; 'stuck' at a certain stage of psycho-sexual development, while physiology matures typically. Consequently, with a developmental lag, necessary social skills to procure and maintain emotional or sexual relationships with appropriately aged peers may be flawed. Looking to children as surrogate 'replacement partners' presents the enigma of an 'adult-child' which, when acted out, can result in a crime against children.

Similar to substance abusers, most perpetrators seem to live with a complex wall of denial that hinders their capacity to experience guilt and shame, thereby protecting from internal distress.² For clerical perpetrators, admission of shame is further impeded because of their elevated social and cultural standing, often the pride and joy of family. Self-stories digress the anxiety of shame and guilt by re-assigning meaning, which shifts responsibility away from themselves, *e.g.*, in blaming their victims.

Possibility

When professional intervention, therapeutic or otherwise, confronts known perpetrators with their untoward actions recognition and ownership may take time, a long time, if at all. The path towards reparation and resolve is often not linear but a confusing ebb and flow of the five Rs – *recognition, remorse, reform, rehabilitate, and resolve* – allowing for the possibility of ‘return’, to seek pardon and healing for all involved.³

‘God has set eternity in all our hearts’ (Eccles 3:11). So we must believe that perpetrators too hunger for something more but may not have the awareness or language to voice such. One perpetrator told me that he found encouragement in the sentiments of Paul – ‘My grace is sufficient for you’ (2 Cor 12) – enabling him, not without considerable apprehension, to try to reach God through his vulnerability. Another, in the confusion of inner upheaval, turned to re-assess his vocational call in an effort to recover his commitment. Of import here is the earnest striving to sustain a firm purpose of amendment which helps to reduce recidivism.

A heart-warming story told to me recounted a chaplain who accompanied a perpetrator in prison for 10 years. Lost in darkness, he eventually showed signs of turning his life around, of light and grace breaking through – helped also by the unwavering prayers of others who earnestly desired his conversion.

2 Shame is how you feel/perceive emotion arising from consciousness of dishonouring one’s self. Guilt is the feeling of responsibility for an action or event: a felt need to redress what you have done or fail to do.

3 See Johanna Merry, ‘Forgiveness and the Legacy of Abuse’. *The Furrow*, Vol. LXXII No, 7/8 (July/August 2021), pp. 417- 418.

Dilemmas

There remains a general reluctance or inhibition to speak openly of the reality of clerical perpetrators, the faith community muted by social and cultural norms. Parents and children who have been hurt by clerical abuse may find themselves drifting to the edge of the faith community. Fellow priests may experience public mistrust, hostility, or even ridicule – a sense of all being tarnished with the same brush. They too must face and resolve their own inner hurt of being let down by colleagues, some of whom may have been previously held role models or cherished friends.

Often, a vocational call is seized as a gift, received in a momentary gesture of faith. Sadly, perpetrators of abuse may have a compromised awareness that their actions are contrary to their call to ministry as a priest. (Some deviant behaviours can also result from organic brain changes which can compromise the perpetrator's *will* to choose.) Some faithful turn to clerics as the one with sacramental power to absolve them from their burden of sin. Adjusting to the contrary perception of a pervert with criminal behaviours towards minors is understandably baffling. Naturally, faith life is jolted! The exodus of large numbers from the institutional Church speaks for itself.

The central dilemma is this: How might the gap in a perpetrator's awareness be bridged? It is important to note that, with ministry withdrawn and intrinsic meaning and purpose of life lost, existential loneliness and isolation can manifest in despair and low mood. Bewildered and troubled, some perpetrators turn to acts of self-harm, even ending their lives through suicide. Could this speak to us of an inner cry for God – something *other* in their human anguish which they are helpless to reach on their own?

Prompts for Spiritual Guides

It follows that those persons lay and clergy/religious who choose to engage in a ministry to perpetrators must sidestep their own biases and strive to adopt an open, non-judgemental, compassionate stance given the ambivalence and the considerable challenge involved. Thus, pastoral/spiritual accompaniment needs to be nuanced differently.

Many clerical perpetrators tend to feel removed from God, or that God is reluctant to show his face – 'put in a cleft of rock by him and shielded with his hand while he passes by ... Only to see his back' (Ex 33:18-23). A

spirit of attentive, hope-filled patience is necessary for prayer companions, while carrying the oft-mute longing of those whom they accompany that God will countenance them. There are benefits to exploring small steps perpetrators can call their own: 'to start close in ... take the first step ... the step you don't want to take'.⁴

Familiar practices such as celebrating Eucharist (within prescribed restrictions) and breviary prayers are welcome starting points. Gradually encourage the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation for healing, strengthening and restoring of broken nature. Contemplation before the Blessed Sacrament allows God's loving gaze to rest on them. Prostration voices a prayer for which there are no words. (The memory and emotion of ordination may awaken with fresh outpouring of grace.) Imaginative prayer, *e.g.*, colloquy format: in spirit of the Wedding Feast of Cana (John 2: 1-11) speak to Mary of longings, with Mary go to Jesus, with Jesus and Mary go to the Father to advocate your needs.

There are more informal personal practices that might also be considered. *Memories*: recall an image, a time/place of love and acceptance in life. Go imaginatively to those people, places or experiences; aided by repetitive mantras – Jesu, Yah-weh, Iosa Criost.

Praying without words: art, pottery, music or even solitary manual work – know that God is in the silence.

Daily Reflection: look back on one's day, noticing emotions, choosing one such feature and pray from it, *e.g.*, gratitude, regret, hope, anger, looking towards tomorrow as a fresh beginning.

Prayers of *intercession* united with a world replete with suffering as in war, famine, droughts ... to catch a view of a God who suffers with humanity. These may stretch to include one's own prayers of petition.

Intentional practices: call to mind familiar persons. These eventually may include those hurt by abuse. Cultivating deliberate acts of kindness, acts of penance, fasting.

I have noticed from my own work of accompanying clerical perpetrators that memory can release an energy in face of spiritual inertia. Some perpetrators return to the memory-capsule of their ordination/profession 'motto' taken at the time – *e.g.*, In God I trust; I love you with an everlasting Love; Be not afraid – awakening in them an energy which

4 David Whyte, 'Start Close In'. *River Flow: New and Selected Poems Revised*. WA, USA: Many Rivers Press, 2012.

takes them back to a seminal place of inspiration and hope. Some religious perpetrators say they benefit from recalling and renewing their affection for the founding charism or spirit which first drew them to the particular religious order.

For example, one religious spoke to me of how pondering anew the founding charism of his order opened up his being again to the depths of God and to the anguish of humankind. Others who renewed interest in the saint whose name was bestowed at profession – *e.g.*, Simon of Cyrene, Peter, Benedict – spoke of a ‘connection’ which seemed to have lessened their pain of isolation and abandon.

Routine mentoring / support is paramount in helping to curb excessive zeal, or impatience with hoped-for change. A sense ‘it is God for his own loving purpose, who puts the will and action’ into us’ (Phil 2:13) that underpins all.

Conclusion

The Church must uphold an unambiguous stance in calling out paedophilic behaviour by clerical perpetrators as a crime. In tandem it must also develop strategic preventative practices to filter out potential risk posed by ‘adult-child’ interpersonal attributes in prospective candidates which can unknowingly be overlooked.

Rehabilitative efforts of known perpetrators need not be in isolation but can be inserted and supported by the wider faith community, expressed in the Christian duty for compassionate outreach. As a model of pastoral praxis, the biblical image of the woman caught in adultery combines a mandate to ‘go and sin no more’ embedded in a spirit of compassion (Jn 8:7).

Exiled is where perpetrators say they find themselves, languishing in the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37). By way of contrast, those rare efforts made to gather groups of known perpetrators in hospitable spaces of trust can make for a difference. Spaces where inner turmoil can be shared, and forlorn spirits heartened so that they can reach closer to God’s breath of life to enter them, and they will *live* again.