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| <b>Title</b>                        | Preface: A Priesthood Imprisoned  |
| <b>Authors(s)</b>                   | Keenan, Marie   |
| <b>Publication date</b>             | 2017-11-27  |
| <b>Publication information</b>      | Ryan, J. E. A Priesthood Imprisoned   |
| <b>Publisher</b>                    | Coventry Press  |
| <b>Link to online version</b>       | <a href="https://coventrypress.com.au/A-Priesthood-Imprisoned">https://coventrypress.com.au/A-Priesthood-Imprisoned</a> |
| <b>Item record/more information</b> | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/12544">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/12544</a>                                       |

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**Preface: Priesthood Imprisoned**

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Paper prepared for Ryan, J. (2018). *A Priesthood Imprisoned*. Melbourne: Coventry Press

ISBN: 9780648145714

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Date:13/05/2017

## Preface: A Priesthood Imprisoned

Marie Keenan

When I wrote *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture* (2012), OUP, in which I proffered a systemic explanation for the problem of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, I sincerely hoped that it would encourage others, especially those with ‘insider knowledge’ and experience to elaborate what I could only begin to suggest. I am so delighted to see that this is what Fr John Ryan has done in this wonderful monograph, so aptly titled *Priesthood Imprisoned*. Dissatisfied with the explanations for and responses to the problem of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church since the early 2000s, from the “rotten apples” theory of infiltrating offenders to the “cover up” theory of incompetent or dishonest bishops, Fr John set out to examine the issue for himself. We arrive at the same spot, from my perspective after a decade of research and involvement with the key actors, and from Fr John’s perspective after a lifetime as a Catholic priest: this is not a problem of individuals – of bad priests or bad bishops– this is a systemic problem of seismic proportions that no amount of individual blaming will solve. To understand and respond adequately and accurately to this problem it must be fully understood. For Fr John the responses to date have been premised on a fundamental individualistic explanatory error while those in authority hope for a cure to be developed within the confines of the existing structures. Systemic problems require systemic solutions<sup>1</sup> and it is “the systemic dysfunction” that Fr John sees as underpinning child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy that this monograph sets out to address. This is a laudable task by an inspiring and wise author. One of the casualties of this systemic dysfunction is “a priesthood imprisoned”. Clearly another is the innocence of children who have suffered child sexual abuse at the hands of some.

I found the first part of the book *What Ails Us?* to be well charted and comprehensive in its focus on understanding and identifying the needs of priests. By offering the reader a summary of existing research and explanatory typologies and models to try to explain some of the current crisis in priesthood today we are well on our way to seeing where Fr John is going: emotionally unhealthy and disregarded clerics who are not sufficiently equipped for the challenges of priestly ministry are at risk of working against the work of Love to which they have been ordained. By combining his knowledge of research on Catholic priesthood

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<sup>1</sup> We both also acknowledge that individual wrongdoing requires individual accountability

with his observations of priesthood in the Catholic Church and applying psychological theories of development to this work, Fr John comes to an important conclusion: that a sizeable number of priests in the Catholic Church are immature and incapable of forming healthy relationships without help. Unfortunately, I came to the same conclusion myself. Unable to form healthy relationships these men will engage in unhealthy ones – and even engage in relationships of an abusive nature, unfortunately including the abuse of children. He and I see this to have been part of the jig-saw puzzle that created the context in which sexual abuse by Catholic clergy became possible. However this factor alone is insufficient to fully explain the problem.

Ever persistent in his quest to examine the puzzle Fr John moves into the realm of spirituality and works in a most readable fashion through the proliferation of theories that help us make sense of the complexity of our life experiences. He considers categories and approaches to spirituality that can provide strength and others that can leave us vulnerable. Noting that Christians have always sought maps and categories to help in their understanding of life with God he suggests that it was mainly the philosophers and the spiritual masters in times gone by who provided this service, which is now so well served (or in my view not so well served) by the modern disciplines of psychology and psychiatry. Observing that not all of us are not equally proficient in the spiritual life, Fr John unpacks some of the insights he personally gained through using what he likes to refer to as his three-stage PIU model of spirituality, The Purgative, Illuminative, Unitive Model [PIU], to take us into some personally reflective depths. The PIU model is helpful and elaborated beautifully in this text– aided by the interweaving of the personal testimony and ‘conversion’ journey of Fr John himself. This was a moving feature of the entire monograph, which I suggest is essential reading for all Catholic clergy.

Going deeper into the question of spirituality in the section of the book, *Relating to God*, I was persuaded by the claim that “the institutional processes of education and formation in the Catholic Church are frozen at immature stages of maturity which rely too much on fear, law and order and control and deprive too many of the experience of Christianity as Love” (p. 43). What an unfortunate situation the Catholic Church has allowed develop! However, in offering suggestions on how to find a way through to the central issue of any spirituality, which is the place it gives to God, to ourselves, and to the relationship between the two, I very much like Fr John’s illumination of two models for a common spirituality (A and B) and his depictions of these perspectives as part of a spiritual continuum. I believe this section of

the book, which is enhanced by the threads of transition and conversion through each line, will be enormously helpful to readers who want to reflect on their own spiritual life. Little condemnation is in sight in these pages. Rather, the wise, reflective, faith-filled and scholarly ideas of a life of reflective and challenging priesthood are eloquently and humbly portrayed and interwoven with the research on the topic: a constant feature of this most wonderful work.

While Fr John suggests that the topic of sexuality is such as to deserve a separate treatment all together, and what he offers is merely indicative rather than adequate, from my perspective his treatise of sexuality is well done and the questioning, even critical, approach adopted to Church teaching is significant, emanating from one who represents the lived experience. The honest appraisal of the lack of work on sexuality in the Bible is also significant and opens up this whole area for serious and honest discussion, from which Fr John does not retreat. The honesty of the discussion will be helpful for opening pathways for discussion among other Catholic clergy as they try to live within the complexity [and strengths, limitations and flaws] of Church teaching on sexuality today.

In order to establish a context for his discussion on leadership in the church Fr John draws on a quote from a Harvard address, of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, delivered in 1978, which helps him reassure readers of his belief that the problems in leadership and governance in the Catholic Church are not confined to that particular institution, but are endemic in all the basic structures of the Western world. The quote from Alexander Solzhenitsyn is fitting and sets the tone for this entire section. In addition, by drawing strongly on Gospel values and the New Testament Fr John offers a perspective that can certainly aid contemporary thinking on the topic. Power and authority are not ignored but rather are examined with a critical eye, with the recent documentation from the Magisterium “that all stops are out to reverse any aberrations in the use of power” welcomed, but with a considered caution: “the new models will not survive unless we put them into new wineskins.... We are not just being given new ideas or gimmicks: we are being called to metanoia, which is a change of mind and heart.... It demands a whole change of values” (p. 86). I cannot disagree with a single argument offered by Fr John in his work on power and authority in the church.

In presenting his treatise of guilt, the superego and healthy conscience, Fr John’s suggests a template for considering our moral world– one ruled by superego and another by healthy conscience. In applying this template to seminary formation the view of Fr John that people

who have been the object of moral “training” rather than moral “education” – what I call a rule-based morality rather than a relational ethic - will encounter particular difficulty in life, goes right to the heart of the matter. Returning again to the Gospel for guidance he further suggests “For the Gospel, the external is secondary; the important element is the heart. The Beatitudes are ‘be-attitudes’, and call for being as the basis for doing. The institutionalized model is built up almost exclusively from a consideration of externals or visibles and is prone to a legalistic approach” (p. 109). This emphasis on ‘the heart’ and the ‘be’ of the Beatitudes which he further develops hold promise for charting a way forward for seminary formation.

In offering some helpful suggestions for a way forward for the Imprisoned Priesthood Fr John rather challengingly reminds that “there are two ways of leaving priesthood: one is to leave and move out, the other is to leave and stay in!”(p. 112). He offers pointers for those who want to leave and stay in..... I think like himself. In my view the only way forward for a healthy life for those who wish to remain in the Catholic priesthood is to leave (the old) and stay in (and create the new). Fr John offers wise guidance on this, with affectivity and mercy key considerations.

This is a wonderful and exciting monograph that brings together much interesting material in a most helpful, warm, wise and innovative way. It will be of benefit to many priests throughout the world – especially those in personal trouble – and will be of interest to the laity and those interested in understanding Catholic priesthood and the Catholic Church. The writing style is warm, personal and accessible, with a depth of scholarship and wisdom. I feel like I know Fr John having read this incredible, moving and wise document. It has been a real privilege and I am humbly honoured to endorse the work.

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