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Responding to the Murphy Report

In the days following the publication of the Murphy report there are so many aspects of abuse and violence to take account of that one almost feels overwhelmed by the complexities of the issues involved. It is not complex to understand that children should not be subjected to sexual abuse and neither does it involved complex thinking to understand that the sexual violation of children is wrong on all counts. Children cannot give consent by definition and that principle is clearly enshrined in the legal codes of Western jurisdictions. However, it is beyond that fact that the complexities of the issues involved are encountered.

The Institution of the Catholic Church is a powerful institution in the world and in the case of Ireland it has held a monopoly over morality and in particular over sexual morality for far too long. Apart from the children who suffered abuse, women in general and men of a homosexual orientation, not to mention many clerical men and religious, are some of the individuals who have suffered most.

The dialogue surrounding child sexual abuse represents an area of human life that is beset with dichotomous thinking, polarizing families, agencies and communities. Individuals are seen as either victims or perpetrators, good or bad, innocent or guilty, loving or abusive and once so classified many other aspects of their lives or intentions are easily obscured. Whilst this may be an understandable emotional reaction to the unfolding problem, it obscures the complexities of individuals' lives, as their intentions and identities become totalised as either good or bad. I wonder if the Murphy Report contributed to such dichotomies, not in relation to the victims whose experiences of abuse were recounted, but in relation to the Bishops who had handled the abuse complaints. In the rush to condemn much gets noticed and much gets missed. This certainly happens when the good become reified and the bad vilified. Both extremes scare me.

Some commentators (Colm Toibin (Lunchtime, Newstalk 30/11/2009) and Eoghan Harris (Lunchtime, Newstalk, 1/12/2009) have a perspective on the current management of the crisis in Ireland that largely concurs with my own. They see the recent manoeuvrings by the Archbishop of Dublin as a strategy to maintain the power of the Institutional Church in Ireland and to do whatever is required in that aim. I do not like to point to individuals when it comes to systems matters but in the current situation I think that one cannot avoid but singling out the role of Archbishop Martin in the current controversy, particularly as the Murphy report singled him out as the good guy. Archbishop Martin, one of its most able subjects was sent by the Vatican to manage the sex abuse crisis in Ireland, and whilst protecting children cannot be dismissed as part of the motivation, to focus on this issue alone would be to obscure the bigger reality. The Archbishop of Dublin was sent to Ireland to do whatever was required to maintain Institutional power. In the process everything is fair game and the sacrificing of individuals is merely 'collateral damage'. In the aim of preserving power everything can be put on the table – everything that is except the big trio of necessary reforms – the theology of sexuality, including clerical celibacy, giving back the Church to the people as envisaged in Vatican 11 and embracing women as full and equal citizens. Dr. Martin is the perfect man for this cleansing power operation as he is at once an insider and an outsider, not part of the Irish Episcopal Conference or of Irish society for over thirty years, and for most of the period under investigation in the Murphy Report. In truth it is easy for

Archbishop Martin to judge those lesser mortals who struggled with the complexities that are involved in managing cases, particularly historical cases, within a climate of deference to Rome and whatever messages were coming from that source – especially without asking these men for their perspective on the matter. It is likely they thought they were acting on behalf and in the interest of the very institution that he too is trying to preserve now – albeit with new child protection structures and policies to force clergy who have abused out of the system altogether.

Whilst there are the most humble and wonderful of individual men and women working as foot soldiers in the name of the Catholic Church, at its institutional core it is a cruel and harsh institution, intent on preserving itself and its institutional power. This goes right to the centre of Vatican control. The harshness with which the institution treats individuals is made all the more noticeable by the rhetoric of love and forgiveness that it pronounces – little of which I see in evidence when the institution is threatened. Under the threat of losing power the tactics are carefully applied. Use of the language of the populace is an important first step. In the current crisis the language of child protection, ‘evil’ perpetrators and sorrow for victims is essential. It is also essential that sorrow is not expressed for perpetrators or their families or even for the bishops who are accused of handling abuse cases poorly, because that might give the wrong impression. Either/ or thinking must apply. In the game of maintaining power individuals can be sacrificed.

I have been speaking for a long time about how harshly men who have abused are treated by the Catholic Church – but nobody wants to know about that, apart from their families and those who love them. Popular opinion argues that by their abusive actions clergy who have ever abused forfeit the right to love or care and in fact no amount of punishment or public humiliation or vilification is ever sufficient. [This is not my own view, but that is a discussion for another day]. However when it comes to other priests and religious sisters the same harshness applies. Those who speak out are severely punished, marginalised and ostracised; critical theologians are ruthlessly cast out. The Catholic Church does not encourage critical thinking. A quick look across the leadership appointments – with some exceptions - supports this thesis.

As an institution the Catholic Church is an unhealthy organisation, bad for your health in its current form. It drives people who work for it to act in ways that they would not otherwise do I am convinced, and their lives and those of others are ruined in the process. Ordination to priesthood should come with a health warning for those who take this path in life, in Ireland at the very least. Increasingly I find myself standing with individuals who are casualties of the Catholic Church, and they are not only victims of clergy – they are the clergy themselves and religious sisters, and even the odd former bishop, all of whom have been crushed by the institutional practices of an Institution that is out of touch with the mission of its founder. In the forthcoming months I will not be surprised to see an exodus from the ranks of the Catholic clergy in Ireland as clergy evaluate their lives and how they are treated. I will be

interested to see if any Irish bishop will do likewise, for self preservation if not for higher ideals.