

The Catholic Church should listen more to victims and survivors of abuse

- **Four-year study listened to the voices of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and others affected across the Catholic community.**
- **It is the first study of how the abuse crisis has impacted the whole Catholic community in England and Wales.**
- **Report finds aspects of Catholic culture were implicated in how abuse happened and how the response often lacked compassion.**
- **Themes include breaking silences, clericalism and accountability.**
- **Points to paths to restore trust and change Catholic culture.**

The whole Catholic Church should listen more to the victims and survivors of clerical child abuse and the experience of affected parish communities and consider appropriate action, a new report says.

The Cross of the Moment report is based on research led by Durham University's Centre for Catholic Studies. It is the first study of how the abuse crisis has impacted the whole Catholic community in England and Wales.

The report suggests that aspects of the culture and practices of the Catholic Church are implicated in how clerical child sexual abuse has happened. They also partly explain how the response of the Church has often failed, causing further pain and harm, described by victims and survivors as 'secondary abuse'.

The report invites groups across the Catholic community to listen more deeply to the voices of those directly and indirectly affected and consider what may need to change in Catholic culture and theological understanding.

It responds to Pope Francis' proposal that to move forward, the Catholic community needs 'a continuous and profound conversion of hearts attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the Church'.

The focus of the research was to listen to the voices of victims and survivors of abuse and their families. It also listened to others either directly or indirectly affected by the abuse crisis including parish communities, laypeople, priests, deacons, bishops, religious communities and safeguarding staff. The report presents theological reflection on the experiences described.

Although the report recognises that progress has been made in safeguarding practice and in finding more compassionate ways to accompany and support victim-survivors, it concludes that more work is needed. It suggests learning from restorative justice and healing circle practices to find ways to heal relationships between victim-survivors and the Catholic community. It also suggests habits of clericalism are changed and accountability within the Church's structures is improved.

The researchers carried out 82 interviews and four focus groups. The participants were drawn from 14 of the 22 Catholic dioceses and 16 religious orders across England and Wales.

All the research participants who had experienced sexual abuse in a Catholic setting had also experienced being treated inadequately by a representative of the Church when they

came forward with an allegation or sought support around a disclosure. Many disclosures were met by denial, disbelief or a lack of compassion for the person and their pain.

A survivor explained this as “how the institution treats you, how the institution ignores you, how the institution doesn’t want to know you”. Another survivor said that “you want belief more than anything or any financial compensation, before anything whatsoever, for somebody to say that they believe you means everything”.

Some victim-survivors had also later experienced sensitive support and solidarity but there were not enough of these ‘glimmers of hope’.

In the research, people from directly affected parishes described the pain and grief when a priest disappears or is found guilty and imprisoned for sexual offences. Fellow priests, deacons and bishops talked about the burden of sadness and fear they experience and the complex responsibilities they carry.

Lead author of the report, Dr Pat Jones from the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, said: “It is transformative to listen deeply to those whose lives and faith have been affected by abuse. We hope this research will enable many more people to approach this painful area of our common life and become part of a redemptive response.”

The aspects of Catholic culture explored in the report include clericalism and the lack of practical structures of accountability. Many research participants spoke about how priests are seen as superior, ‘God-like’, untouchable and assumed to be holy by default. One participant said: “We’ve put people on this pedestal and we’ve left them there”.

Discussing accountability, one priest said: “I think we’re the least monitored, least controlled, least supervised group of people in the whole world”.

The report discusses areas of Catholic teaching and theology which underpin or influence how these aspects of Catholic culture and practice have developed and draws out different interpretations. In relation to clericalism for example, the report points to the theology of the priesthood of the whole baptised community which needs greater emphasis.

The report also highlights the importance of the current development within the global Catholic Church of practices of ‘synodality’. Synodal processes can help Catholic communities to reflect on the abuse crisis and recognise what needs to be healed and changed.

One victim-survivor said: “This is a practical, compassionate and honest document revealing that victims’ cries for justice, healing and transparency were possibly silenced by structures within the Church itself. As we move forward, we are reminded that a conversion of hearts is advocated by Pope Francis - without this, no real change can be affected.”

Baroness Sheila Hollins is a cross-bench life peer in the House of Lords and a former member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. She commented: “This is an excellent report which discusses most of the issues in a convincing way. It will be a valuable resource for the continuing work we need to do at every level. That work of healing needs to be led by survivors, whose voices and insights are prominent in the report.”

Antonia Sobocki is the director of the charity, LOUDfence, which aims to work with churches to actively foster a culture which is pro-safeguarding and truth telling. She commented: “The Cross of the Moment Report has captured with great clarity and objectivity the same observations as the ‘on the ground work’ of LOUDfence UK activists.

“I commend the report for equipping the whole church with a diagnostic resource which will be invaluable in its mission of collective healing, restorative justice and care.”

If you are affected by any of the issues raised in this article, support is available from Safe Spaces on 0300 303 1056 or visit www.safespacesenglandandwales.org.uk.

Ends

Source information

“The Cross of the Moment”. A report from the Boundary Breaking Project by the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University by Dr Pat Jones, Dr Marcus Pound and Dr Catherine Sexton.

An embargoed copy of the full report is available on request from Durham University Communications Office via communications.team@durham.ac.uk

Research funding

The research was mainly funded by the Porticus Foundation, a Catholic grant-making trust, with additional funding from two religious orders - the British Jesuit Province and the English Benedictine Congregation.

Project governance

The research was conducted between 2019 and 2023 by the Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS) at Durham University with the support of an independently chaired steering group and an advisory body of stakeholders. Survivors were members of both groups.

The Durham University core team consisted of Dr Marcus Pound, Dr Catherine Sexton and Dr Pat Jones, working with Professor Paul Murray and Professor Karen Kilby and supported by Yvonne Williams. The Steering Group was chaired by Dr Julie Clague from the University of Glasgow.

For a full list of members of the project team and steering group, please see:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/boundary-breaking/>

The research was carried out under strong ethical principles as required by the nature of the topic and as expected by the ethical research principles of Durham University.

What the report does not cover

The report does not cover safeguarding policy or practice in any detail, nor is it concerned with any particular cases. There are already expert agencies and structures, including the new fully independent agencies, Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA) and Religious Life Safeguarding Service (RLSS), charged with ensuring that all Catholic institutions maintain high standards of safeguarding practice.

Useful links

Centre for Catholic Studies - <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/>