

Sex Abuse: The Scandal the Catholic Church Cannot Shake

Colm O’Gorman was 14 years old when Father Sean Fortune arrived unannounced at his parents’ house in a small town in southern Ireland. The priest was given tea and a seat by the fire, and asked the teenager to help set up a youth group.

“I was 14, and very eager and hungry to be out in the world, involved in things, doing things, making a difference. And that’s what he exploited,” said O’Gorman, now 46 and the executive director of Amnesty International in Ireland.

The abuse that followed, culminating in Fortune’s repeated rape of the boy, was part of one of the greatest scandals ever to hit the Catholic Church, damaging the curtailed papacy of Pope Benedict and posing a huge challenge to whoever succeeds him.

O’Gorman’s story is just one in a worldwide scandal that destroyed lives, bankrupted dioceses, and in many cases cost the Church its most precious asset: faith.

No questions were asked when Fortune took O’Gorman to his isolated house for the weekend. Such was the Church’s power in Ireland at that time, no one would question a priest.

That was the first time Fortune sexually assaulted O’Gorman. Driving him back to his parents the next day, the priest stopped the car around the corner from the teenager’s home.

“There were no words that I had that could explain what had happened, and I was terrified,” O’Gorman recalls. “He said to me: ‘I’m worried about you, you have a problem. Either I can tell your parents, or you can come back down to me again.’”

“He kept coming and taking me away, for nearly three years.”

Fortune's attacks became increasingly violent and escalated to rape. O'Gorman, depressed and suicidal, finally fled his hometown. He became homeless on the streets of Dublin.

It took a decade for O'Gorman to re-establish contact with his family and explain what had happened. With their support, he made a report to the Irish police in 1995.

"Within weeks, I heard back from the detective who had started the case that they had found another five victims," O'Gorman said.

Recurring Pattern

The investigation revealed a bully priest who manipulated and abused people wherever he went, and a Church hierarchy that, after receiving complaints about him, moved him on to places where he found new victims: a pattern that recurred in its handling of abuse cases worldwide.

Fortune killed himself in 1999 while on trial for 66 accounts of assault and rape of boys.

Though there was little legal precedent, O'Gorman took a civil suit against the Diocese of Ferns and Pope John Paul in 1998, in which he cited evidence that Fortune's crimes were well known but that the Church did nothing to limit his access to children.

The diocese apologized in 2003 and paid O'Gorman 300,000 euros (\$389,500) in compensation.

In a dramatic illustration of the loss of faith in the Church across the developed world, Ireland—where Catholicism was written into the constitution and had enormous influence throughout the 20th century—closed its embassy to the Holy See in 2011 as relations hit an all-time low.

The sexual abuse crisis and its continuing repercussions on the Church was likely one of the difficulties Benedict

referred to when he became the first pontiff in centuries to abdicate, saying he no longer had the strength to continue.

For 20 years before becoming pope, the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was the man in charge of coordinating the Church's response to abuse cases, as prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. A meticulous scholar, he spent years reading the details of case after case of abuse.

"There was no one in the Church hierarchy who was better positioned to make a real difference than Pope Benedict," David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said last week. "He had both the power and the knowledge."

Filth in the Church

Shortly before his election in 2005, Ratzinger gave a now-famous address in which he lamented "filth" in the Church, seen as an indicator he would take a tougher line if made pope.

After his election, as the scandal was gaining more publicity, Benedict met abuse victims in Germany, the United States, Australia, Malta and Britain, and barred two high-profile former Vatican favorites suspected of abuse from office.

The barring from public ministry of charismatic Italian priest Gino Burresi and Marcial Maciel, the Mexican founder of the Legionaries of Christ religious order, marked a watershed, showing the Church was finally acting against abuse.

Victims groups say that the Vatican had a policy of not reporting abusive priests to secular authorities, citing evidence such as a letter sent by its head of clergy to a French bishop in 2001, commending him for not denouncing a pedophile priest who had been given 18 years jail for abusing young boys.

They are demanding a comprehensive Church policy for

protecting the millions of children still in its care in schools, hospitals and youth groups worldwide, and the demotion of clergy who hid abuse in the past.

The Benedict papacy's response, O'Gorman said, "falls at the first and most important hurdle. That is to simply acknowledge the truth of what happened, and the truth of its role in the cover up of crimes by priests across the world."

With the victims still far from satisfied, the abuse crisis still hangs over the Vatican as the its cardinals—the "princes of the Church"—gather to elect Benedict's successor.

Sin of a Priest

Cardinal Roger Mahony, who as archbishop of Los Angeles worked to shield pedophile priests from prosecution, according to files unsealed by court order in January, has expressed incomprehension about accusations leveled against the clergy over their handling of cases in the past.

"People say: 'Well, why didn't you call the police?' In those days no one reported these things to the police, usually at the request of families," he told the Catholic News Service on arrival in Rome.

The Vatican's chief prosecutor of sex abuse under Benedict, Monsignor Charles Scicluna, said in an Italian television interview last week: "This disease affects all places and all society, but unfortunately our sin makes the news. Why does the sin of a priest create more fuss?"

The Vatican emphasized last week that it was the duty of cardinals to attend the conclave unless there was a serious impediment such as health. Britain's most senior cardinal Keith O'Brien excluded himself from the conclave after allegations he had behaved inappropriately with other priests.

He admitted his sexual conduct was not that expected of a priest. No allegations suggest this involved children.

Some cardinals have been suggested as “clean hands” candidates for the papacy, notably U.S. Cardinal Sean O’Malley, who published a list of clergy accused of abuse on the Boston Archdiocese website and established a system for mandatory reporting of allegations to civil authorities.

Whoever the next pontiff is, he will have to face a scandal that caused two million Catholics to leave the Church in the United States alone, according to one University of Notre Dame study.

“It doesn’t just damage the body, but the soul, and the faith of believers,” said Scicluna.

“This is a battle that we cannot afford to lose.”

(\$1 = euros)

Editing by Philip Pullella and Robin Pomeroy

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.