



Irish Synodal Pathway:

Submission of Towards Peace

This submission is a call to the Church to hear the prophetic voice of survivors, and to act on the wisdom of their experience so as to renew the Church that failed to protect children and continues to fail survivors.

Preamble

Towards Peace was invited to participate in the synodal process and this submission is the response to that invitation.

Towards Peace is a spiritual support service to survivors of abuse by clergy and religious and in Church run institutions on the island of Ireland. It has provided spiritual accompaniment to survivors since its foundation in 2013. It is funded by the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) and the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI). The Coordinator of Towards Peace is a professionally qualified social worker who is also a trained and accredited spiritual director. The Oversight Committee comprises representatives of the IEC and AMRI, a survivor of abuse who is also a therapist and advocate, a spiritual director and others with relevant qualifications and experiences. The Coordinator and a majority of the members of the Oversight Committee, including the Chair, are lay people.

Towards Peace responded to the invitation to participate in the Synod in two ways: by consulting with eight survivors and by reflecting on its own experience of working with survivors. This submission has three parts:

1. A poem written by a priest of the Archdiocese of Dublin who is an abuse survivor;
2. The report of a consultation with a group of survivors;
3. A reflection on the Church's response to the abuse of children by Church personnel and within Church run institutions by the Oversight Committee of Towards Peace.

1 SYNODAL ODE TO THE CHURCH

Memory still manages to constipate me and

How I wish it was only bowel!

Nay even vowel and consonant -

Stuck constantly

I have to celebrate First Holy Communion

I can't let them down

Sure they're only eight

Like I was when he got me

Only eight when father got me

The poison seeping slowly in

To seep slowly out for years -

A holy terror!

Victim, nay survivor and

Victimiser prior to Grace.

Therapy - luxury of the few

Helps a little

Helps me enough not to rage

Too much - helps a little to rein rage.

A little - enough not to stab and stab my

Morbid obesity but drag it daily....

Yes here we are still abusing

Using cleverer words

More colourful masks - this church - this beautiful church...

This fucking church that I love!!

2 Report of a consultation with a group of survivors

This part is the outcome of a process of consultation with a group of survivors who were asked to reflect on their experiences and what might be learned by the Church from these experiences.

Towards Peace appointed an independent therapist with extensive experience of working with survivors of abuse to facilitate the process. A meeting was held on 21 May 2022 and attended by six of the eight survivors who were invited to participate. All eight who were approached expressed interest in participation but two were unable to attend the meeting, due to prior commitments. These two made their contributions to the process separately. The eight came with a variety of experiences of abuse: abuse by religious orders, by diocesan priests, and abuse perpetrated within, or associated with, Church run institutions. It is not asserted that this group represents all of those who were abused in a Church context in Ireland.

Representatives of Towards Peace sat in on the meeting as note takers and, later, worked with the facilitator on this report. A draft report of the meeting was circulated to those who attended for correction and amendment. The draft report was changed to take account of the observations and suggested changes of the survivors who participated in the meeting.

This report is not a verbatim account of what was said at the meeting. Rather, the contributions of the participants are grouped under overarching themes. Though the participants had a variety of backgrounds and experiences, there was a remarkable degree of unanimity when it came to describing what the Church had done wrong and what is needed to put things right. This can be stated simply as adopting a gospel-based approach to dealing with abuse within the Church. That would involve setting aside considerations such as the reputation of the institution, money and financial assets, and status and power, in order to encounter survivors at a human level and respond to them as Jesus responded to those he met in the course of his ministry.

This report does not name the participants. This was a decision taken by the participants after careful consideration. The participants wish this document to be read and understood as their collective response to the issues they discussed. It is not to be understood as a repeat of the well known views of particular individuals, and dismissed as such.

The themes arising from the consultation with survivors are:

1. Secondary victimisation, sacrifice and betrayal;
2. Listening, but not hearing;
3. The Church's preoccupation with money;
4. The personal cost of engaging with the Church; and
5. A gospel-based response to abuse within the Church.

Theme One: Secondary Victimisation, Sacrifice and Betrayal

The participants had all experienced abuse in its various forms: physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual and neglect. All agreed that this abuse is not just part of their past, it is part of their present. Abuse is an experience that endures. Some of those present spoke of how it has only been relatively recently that they have begun to process issues related to their abuse and have sought counselling in relation to it. One of those present spoke of how he thought that the trial, conviction and imprisonment of his abuser would bring him some closure. On the contrary, it precipitated a crisis and the work of recovery only really began after the trial. One of those who was unable to attend the meeting also highlighted the impact of a criminal trial and how the process of giving evidence, often in very gruelling detail, is akin to re-experiencing the abuse suffered. While there is little the Church can do about the conduct of such trials, some consideration needs to be given to support for people required to give evidence. Another

participant, also now struggling to come to terms with a dark episode from her past, reflected that what is lost forever through abuse is the opportunity to meet the person you might have been if you had never been abused.

All those present agreed that the secondary victimisation was often as bad, and sometimes worse, than the initial abuse. The secondary victimisation resulted from the response of Church authorities to complaints and disclosures. In one extreme example, a survivor was manhandled out of the office of a religious superior when he asked why nothing had been done about the man who had abused him. Secondary victimisation generally came about in more insidious ways, like the parish priest who told a survivor that it was a pity that her abuser had been given a prison sentence, since he 'had not done very much'. Particularly objectionable is the way in which survivors of abuse are treated as 'damaged people'. The damaged people are those who abuse children and those who deny, minimise and cover up abuse. Secondary victimisation, one survivor pointed out, is double abuse and impacts the family of the survivors, as well as the survivors themselves.

The Church is very good at explaining away or minimising abuse. One participant referred to the 'Bumper Book of Catholic Excuses'. There is, for example, a tendency to talk about what was intended, as though the intentions of those who ran institutions is somehow more important than the lived experience of those who were abused within them.

A particularly egregious form of secondary victimisation occurs in civil cases for compensation. Solicitors who take on such cases often warn their clients to prepare for an ordeal. The process is adversarial, not pastoral. Those who make disclosures of abuse generally do not wish to engage in a legal process but often feel forced to do so. It is a measure of how far the Church has departed from its own original ethos that it subjects those it has hurt to further damaging experiences.

One participant spoke of his civil case, which took ten years to settle, and the pressure put on him during it. This included the threat that he could lose his family home if he did not settle the case. Eventually, even his own solicitor was pressurising him to settle. This participant argued that some sort of legal process may be necessary to settle some disputed cases but that it should be possible to have a code of conduct which would include, for example, agreement that cases would be settled within two years. Others argued for a non-adversarial approach to dealing with the issue of compensation. Some Church authorities have a 'deny till they die' approach, they said. Another commented that what you get at the end of a civil case is a cheque, not remorse.

Lying was described by many of the participants as part of the response by Church officials to their disclosures of abuse. Survivors are strongly motivated by a concern that other children are not subjected to the same abuse that they experienced and they need to know that steps are being taken to ensure their abuser is no longer in a position to abuse children. Two survivors were given assurances on this matter that turned out to be false. One person recounted her decision to withdraw from a process that she believed was deeply flawed. A senior church official explained her withdrawal to a third party by claiming she was unwell, which was untrue. When it was discovered what the Church official had done, he did not deny it but rather explained that it was necessary for the good of the Church. These examples of lying were experienced as betrayal, as survivors were misled by people in whom they had placed their trust. Such lying illustrated the willingness of Church officials to sacrifice survivors for what they considered to be the good of the Church.

Participants spoke of the hurt caused when they met Church officials who treated them as though their only interest was in financial compensation. This was an example, at a micro level, of that characteristic of the Church's response to abuse: listening, but not hearing.

Theme Two: Listening but not Hearing

There were some differences in the approach of participants to the importance of financial compensation for abuse but agreement that treating people who disclose abuse as motivated only, or primarily, by a desire for such compensation is a form of secondary victimisation. In the first instance, people who disclose abuse want acknowledgement of what has happened, an apology and assurance that steps will be taken to prevent any further abuse. If those who are listening to disclosures of abuse would hear what is being said to them, they would ask something like: "What can I do to help?" Instead, the experience has been of people being asked whether they have spoken to a solicitor. There is a self-fulfilling prophecy at work in such situations. Many are driven to go the 'legal route' precisely because the Church has not heard and responded appropriately to them.

The Church claims credit for 'listening to survivors'. One person spoke of an element of manipulation in processes such as this or the meeting of survivors with Pope Francis. The Church is claiming credit for being seen to do the right thing but if the listening does not involve hearing and the hearing does not lead to action, it becomes an empty gesture. More than that, however, it becomes another form of secondary victimisation because people invest their hopes in the process, only to have them dashed.

Many survivors invested in a listening process that took place a number of years ago. They bared their souls to those they met, in the hope that it might bring about real change in the Church's approach. However, nothing happened.

One participant spoke about how the Church's initiatives in this area often respond more to the Church's own needs rather than those of survivors. When the counselling service that evolved into Towards Healing – acknowledged by all as an excellent service – was set up, it was given the Irish name 'Faoiseamh'. Nobody, least of all survivors, could pronounce or spell it, which became an obstacle to accessing it. The name meant something to those who were providing the service, not to those hoping to avail of it.

There is little evidence that the Universal Church 'hears' what has been happening in countries such as Ireland and applies the lessons that have been learned. Participants spoke of very recent abuses they had heard about in other countries, the poor treatment of survivors there, of measures taken to silence them, and steps taken by Church authorities to suppress their stories.

Theme Three: The Church's Preoccupation with Money

The theme of money runs through all the discussions about the Church's response to abuse and is intermingled with all the other themes. It comes up in different contexts. It relates to that form of secondary victimisation that consists of treating those who disclose abuse as only or primarily interested in financial compensation. It also relates to the concern of the Church about its own assets.

Survivor groups are told that the religious orders have no more money to pay out in compensation. However, it is known that many orders have very substantial sums of money in investments. This is needed, the orders say, to ensure that they can provide for their older members. There was consensus within the group that older and infirm members of religious orders should be cared for and not live in abject poverty. Yet, many survivors of abuse live in abject poverty. The members of religious orders have private medical insurance. Many survivors do not.

In a more general way, participants spoke of the difficulty of accepting the idea that the Church is poor when there is so much evidence to the contrary, both here in Ireland and in other countries. As discussed further under theme five, there was a sense that a humbler Church, and one less

preoccupied with its financial assets, might be better placed to respond appropriately to those who disclose abuse.

Despite all the concern about allegedly diminishing assets, Church bodies always seem to have enough money to obtain the best legal advice and to pay the costs associated with long drawn out civil cases.

Theme Four: The Personal Cost of Engaging with the Church

All of those attending the meeting are involved, in one way or another, in helping others who were abused in a Church context. Participants spoke of their wish to bear witness to the pain and sense of betrayal of other survivors. This has taken a variety of forms, such as, speaking out publicly and advocating for people in dispute with Church authorities. It has also involved engaging with the Church, as evidenced by their participation in this process. This has come at a cost.

The element of manipulation and secondary victimisation that goes with inviting survivors to participate in listening exercises that lead nowhere has been referred to already. The damage done has not simply been to emotional and psychological health and well-being. Souls have been damaged too. Some people spoke of their estrangement from the Church.

Those who have agreed to engage with the Church in exercises such as this synodal one are often seen by other survivors in a negative light. One participant spoke of the acute pain and hurt that goes with being accused by your peers of disloyalty. Another spoke of receiving very abusive messages and even death threats when it became publicly known that she had engaged in such a process a number of years ago.

Despite their experiences, and without much hope of seeing the kind of fundamental change understood as necessary, all of the participants had willingly agreed to participate in this exercise. One said he did so only as a means of bearing witness to the treatment of survivors. Another said she hopes that bishops can learn from survivors what a proper response to abuse within the Church should be.

Two participants had engaged directly with bishops on a training and awareness raising level, as distinct from the level of dealing with individual complaints. They both found resistance born of fear and shame. When it was possible to get past the fear and shame to an encounter between people, communication was possible. This led to a discussion about a gospel-based response to abuse within the Church.

Theme Five: A Gospel-based response to abuse within the Church

There was a consensus that bishops and other church officials do not know how to respond to people who disclose abuse and need to be trained for it. Training is not the complete answer. Only those with a capacity to empathise with survivors, and a willingness to do so, should undertake this work. Training can build on this capacity for empathy, if it is the right kind of training.

When a person discloses abuse, they typically regress to that point in their life when the abuse occurred. So, when a bishop or other church official meets with a person in this context he needs to be aware that the person present is not the adult who appears before him, but the hurt child concealed within. Those who are ill prepared for meetings with survivors can inflict a lot of damage. A badly phrased question might convey an unintended message of scepticism or disbelief, which could be devastating for the person concerned.

Those involved in training of bishops spoke of the layers of fear and shame that have to be worked through before any real communication and learning can take place. The fear has to do with the possibility of being overwhelmed by the emotions of the survivor, or of being in a situation they

cannot control. The shame is the knowledge that something appalling has occurred in an institution to which the bishop has devoted his life. These experiences of fear and shame are precisely what survivors experienced and helping people to recognise the commonality of their experiences can help to open up channels of communication. The danger is that the bishop stays 'in role' and clings to his status as a means of resisting an encounter with another human being.

One participant was part of a team of trainers, from a variety of backgrounds, who delivered training to bishops in another country. Survivors were equal members of the training team. It was residential, over three days. Trainers and trainees were together for meals and leisure time as well as the training sessions. Attendance was mandatory for the bishops. There were no titles and everyone was addressed by their first name only. There was a lot of tension at first but then people met each other as people. There was no 'them and us'. At the end, there was an open forum. The questions asked revealed the depth of the bishops' lack of knowledge. The programme was a success. It helped the bishops and the survivors involved. It worked because it was training and awareness raising, but also a human encounter.

Other examples of good practice were given at the meeting. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin was experienced by participants as someone who listened, heard and acted on what survivors told him. Pope Francis, when he was in Dublin, was asked specifically to say that it is not a mortal sin for mothers who were separated from their babies in mother and baby homes to look for them later. He did so at the mass in the Phoenix Park. It was a transformative and healing moment for many people. It lifted a cloud of shame from many of the mothers. It had a practical and immediate impact. There was an 800% increase in tracing enquiries.

Outlined below are steps for a reparative process of response to a disclosure of abuse in a Church context. The practical measures are important but their implementation is as much about hearts and minds as it is about strategies and practices. One participant referred to Church leaders who are very good Catholics but not such good Christians. Something has to die within in the Church as it is now, so that something new can be born. Lying to survivors, manipulating them and sacrificing them to the supposed greater good of the Church must cease. In its place must come humility and recognition of survivors as people who are precious in the eyes of God.

Steps in a reparative process¹:

- Meetings with survivors have to be planned carefully and carried out by those with appropriate attitudes and training. In the first instance, lay professionals should conduct such meetings, though, at a later point, a meeting with a bishop or other Church leader may be appropriate;
- The survivor should be asked what assistance he or she requires;
- A person should be appointed to act as the survivor's contact person. This person should provide accurate information and ensure the process of dealing with the person's complaint is transparent at every stage in the process, including the canonical process. The contact person should ensure that the survivor is aware of anything said about them by the respondent (person said to have abused them) and given a right of reply;
- There should be an acknowledgement that abuse has occurred;
- There should be an apology that contains an acknowledgment of responsibility². Apologies should not be written by lawyers. Such apologies are easily recognisable and add insult to injury;
- The safety of other potential victims should be assured and the steps taken to do so explained to the survivor;
- Canonical processes need to be speeded up. 'Justice delayed is justice denied';

¹ All participants agreed with these steps, but with some variation in the order of them. For this reason they are listed as a set of bullet points, rather than numbered which might imply a preferred sequence

² 'I am sorry that you were abused' is an expression of regret. 'I am sorry that we abused you' is an apology.

- The Church body (diocese or order) should make restitution. This could be compensation and compensation should be available, if sought, through a non-adversarial process with a limit of two years for settlement. At the very least, restitution should include payment for counselling/ therapy and medical expenses.

NB: all of the above refers to the Church's response to a disclosure of abuse. It presupposes that the Church follows national child protection guidelines and cooperates with the civil authorities.

Jesus reached out to those on the margins. The Church must do the same and invite those who have been abused to come forward and tell their stories.

Church leaders have to make different choices. When faced with an allegation, they must refer, in the first instance, to the gospel, not the lawyers.

The Church has to atone for the sins of abuse and all the wrongs that were done to survivors, as the survivors sought to address the issue with Church authorities. Words that are carefully chosen and spoken with humility and sincerity help, but they are not enough. They have to be accompanied by actions to repair the damage done and to prevent further abuse. There must be a commitment to truth, accountability and transparency in relation to the issue of abuse and how it is dealt with within the Church. All attempts to suppress or undermine the voices of survivors must cease, including, for example, the use of non-disclosure agreements in settling claims for compensation. The Church must commit to learning from the mistakes and failures made in countries such as Ireland and not repeating these in other parts of the world.

Abuse is part of the story of the Church. If we are truly to come to terms with it, we must acknowledge it and teach people about it, including children, so the next generation of Catholics will be better equipped to ensure it does not happen again.

3 A reflection on the Church's response to the abuse of children by Church personnel and within Church run institutions by the Oversight Committee of Towards Peace.

Note: This concluding part of the submission is the outcome of a process of prayer, reflection and discussion involving the Coordinator and members of the Oversight Committee of Towards Peace. The text in quotation marks consists of extracts from the discussion that took place on 24 May 2022, as part of the preparation of this submission.

Failure

There is a strong sense that we, as a Church, both failed to protect children in the past and continue to fail survivors in the present. This has generated a lot of righteous anger. Beneath the anger there is sadness and the pain of loss. This loss, which for some includes the loss of God, is felt most acutely by those who experienced abuse. It is felt also by the lay faithful, those who remain, and those who have left because they cannot hear the Good News in a Church that failed so many. It is felt by the many priests and religious who remained faithful to their calling.

“The greatest crime to commit is to destroy the soul of someone”

We are convinced that a warped understanding of sexuality and sexual sin impacted on the way that people (clerical, religious and lay) were formed within the Church. This has been a source of great suffering to many. Some of those who ministered in the Church, lacking any proper or adequate formation, descended into sexual dysfunction and offending.

“The Church got scrupulous about the wrong kinds of things and shame was used as an instrument of control”

We believe in a radical overhaul of those hierarchical Church structures that create and sustain opportunities for people whose primary motivation is exercising power rather than expressing love. Sexual abuse is also an abuse of power. Oppressive power structures leave the vulnerable unprotected.

“Over time, the bad spirit has infiltrated the Church, using the traits of power and control, to move the mindset to a protection of image, of being perfect and externally holy, and righteous”

“Church leaders went to lawyers and experts and handled the situation purely from a non-religious secular, managerial perspective”

“Consider the way in which people told downright lies. What structure supports people to tell lies? Some saw themselves as protecting the institutions of the Church but, in doing so, they undermined, to the point of negation, the message of the Gospel”

We are dismayed at entrenched negative attitudes within the Church that are holding us back from making the changes we need to make. There is impatience with the demands of safeguarding. There is a criticism of survivors and an unwillingness to engage with them. There is a growing sense of the Church as the victim of a hostile media and civil society, which overlooks the important role that the institutions of civil society, including the media, played in supporting survivors, long before the Church did so.

“Great harm has been done by the way in which survivors were dealt with, and there is great danger in the current attempts by some Church leaders to sideline them and their concerns, and the whole safeguarding project within the Church”

Metanoia: transforming hearts and minds

We believe that, in this moment, all of us – Church leaders and workers, lay faithful and survivors – are called to conversion. It must start with welcoming survivors, listening to them, and hearing them as though for the first time. We must all allow ourselves to be transformed by what we hear so that, together, we can change the Church.

“This Synodal process is a catharsis, an emptying out, an opportunity for a fresh start. We need to recognise the presence of God in all people – God in all things”

It is our conviction that the survivors can be healers, if we welcome them and the gifts they bring. They can help the rest of us to let go of those things that have oppressed us, even as they have harmed them - our warped understanding of sexuality; our structures of oppression that enforce order but lack love; our preoccupation with our own status and position that prevents us offering ourselves in service to others.

“Circles of listening bring people together in cells – survivors and Church leaders and faithful. This creates a sense of empowering each other. Survivors can become the healers of those who wounded them”

“We have an enduring stereotype of survivors as angry and bitter, and we need to reframe that to see survivors as no longer a threat to be controlled but a gift to be cherished”

We welcome, indeed rejoice in, the synodal path as one of dialogue and journeying with others. We must pledge ourselves to journey with survivors, to meet with them, preferably in small groups where dialogue is possible and opens us to the presence of the Spirit. Those of us who were privileged to meet with the survivors who participated in the meeting in May know that the Spirit was with us that day.

If we trust that the Spirit is with us, then all will be well.