

Ryan Report in world context

At the risk of readers simply turning away from more reaction to the Ryan Report on the abuse of children in institutions in Ireland, I would like to offer some reflections on how we, the church, may find that God writes straight with crooked lines, as an old (Spanish?) saying goes – how we may find a new spirit and new heart to guide us in the coming decades.

I have no personal experience of being abused (although, growing up in the 1940s and 50s, physical punishment was part of growing up). My first appointment after ordination was as chaplain to Artane Boys School, where I was sent with no preparation whatsoever. At that time, however, the numbers had been reduced to about 300 (from 800); I saw little sign of abuse in the nine months I was there, but it was clearly not a desirable kind of home for boys. Over the years, I have met a number of people who did experience abuse in home situations; none that I know of who experience abuse as a child in an institution.

When I was serving in Westland Row parish in Dublin, over a number of years I used to load up my Renault 4 with local children, always with parental consent, and go on a trip to the Dublin mountains or the Hell Fire Club. Thankfully, there was never a problem, and I enjoyed their thrill at seeing sheep or blackberries, or at looking down at where they lived through binoculars. I would never have dreamed that our situation would change so radically.

Understanding the situation

In the light of the Ryan report, and awaiting the report on the diocese of Dublin, I recognise the shock I feel at the prevalence and severity of the abuse of children in church institutions. Even making all due allowance for the contemporary culture in relation to poverty and to corporal punishment and discipline, the Ryan findings are shocking. I think sometimes of my sixteen nieces and nephews (and now of the following generation), and the thought of any child suffering as we have learned now is totally repugnant.

A question I now ask is whether the church is in fact an accurate image of this practice in wider society. Of course, this should not be the case – any Christian church should be a model of care for those most vulnerable, with far less incidence of abuse. As a predominantly Christian country, the people of Ireland should present a shining example of such care.

I am aware that, if I had been a member of one of the congregations on which Ryan reported, I could easily have been sucked into the prevailing culture in regard to children in institutions. If I had been a bishop in the years before our present state of awareness, it seems likely that I could have taken the same psychiatric,

psychological, and legal advice, and would probably, even with the best of intentions, have acted accordingly.

Additionally, we can ask what happens when good people are put in a position of power and dominance over others. The Stanford University prison role playing experiment (<http://www.prisonexp.org/>) in 1971 offers insight into what seems to have developed in our own institutions, as well as in cases like Abu Ghraib. The two-week experiment had to be terminated after six days. The Milgram experiment (<http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7article/article35.htm>) at Yale in 1961 may illustrate the extent to which people are willing to act out of normal character in causing pain when they themselves are subjected to a position of obedience and assured of indemnity because they are following orders.

Defining the problem gives rise to many different approaches, so it seems difficult to present a coherent overall picture. What exactly constitutes abuse of children? How does one structure a survey on a matter, much of which takes place in secrecy, and which involves such deep hurt and emotion? While allowing that we may never arrive at 100% of the truth, how can we best facilitate full disclosure?

The executive summary of the Ryan report gives its definition:

The expression “abuse” is defined in section 1(i) of the Principal Act, as amended by section 3 of the 2005 Act, as:-

- (a) *the wilful, reckless or negligent infliction of physical injury on, or failure to prevent such injury to, the child,*
- (b) *the use of the child by a person for sexual arousal or sexual gratification of that person or another person,*
- (c) *failure to care for the child which results, or could reasonably be expected to result, in serious impairment of the physical or mental or development of the child or serious adverse effects on his or her behaviour or welfare, or*
- (d) *any other act or omission towards the child which results, or could reasonably be expected to result, in serious impairment of the physical or mental health or development of the child or serious adverse effects on his behaviour or welfare, and cognate words shall be construed accordingly.*

UNICEF (April 2007) offers a “key data” on the state of protection of children around the world under a variety of categories not specifically included above:

Birth Registration (2003)

In 2003 nearly 50 million births go unregistered every year.

Child Labour (2004)

- Estimates suggest that there were about 317 million economically active children aged 5 to 17 in 2004, of whom 218 million could be regarded as child

labourers. Of the latter, 126 million were engaged in hazardous work.

- Children working in the home of a third party or ‘employer’ are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. ILO estimates that more girls under age 16 are in domestic service than in any other category of child labour.
- It is estimated that 5.7 million children are trapped into forced or bonded labour.

Child Marriage

- Data collected from 1987 to 2005 showed that in developing countries 36 per cent of women aged 20-24 were married or in union before they reached 18 years of age.
- An estimated 14 million adolescents between 15 and 19 give birth each year.

Child Trafficking

- According to the latest estimates in for 2002, some 1.2 million children are trafficked worldwide every year.

Children Associated with Armed Groups

- Latest estimates suggest that more than 250,000 children are currently serving as child soldiers.
- An estimated 90 per cent of global conflict-related deaths since 1990 have been civilians, and 80 percent of these have been women and children.

Children and Justice

- More than 1 million children worldwide are detained by law enforcement officials.

Children without Parental Care

- There are an estimated 133 million children who are orphans (children aged 0–17 who have lost one or both parents) world wide. Of these children, 15 million were orphaned by AIDS, more than 12 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Asia has the highest number of orphans due to all causes, with 74 million children.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

- Of the 1.39 million people involved in forced commercial sexual exploitation and 40–50 per cent are children.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

- It is estimated that more than 130 million women and girls alive today have been subjected to female genital mutilation/cutting.

Violence against Children

- Studies conducted since 1980 suggest that worldwide 20 per cent of women and 5 to 10 per cent of men suffered sexual abuse as children.

Clearly child abuse, in varying terms, is world-wide. The situation revealed in the Ryan report may be an accurate reflection of what goes on in our private homes all over the country. Here, however, there is no single target like the church, and there is little likelihood of a “Redress” board. There have been many other institutions also, which the Ryan report did not cover.

The future

Certainly, the church has been highlighted for its failures and criminal activity in these matters. Instead of bewailing that the church is made a scapegoat for the failings of society or the state, we could welcome the challenge of being a lightning-rod for the rest of Irish society, and for the rest of the world.

I do not know whether studies similar to the Ryan Report have been carried out in other countries, but the Ryan results have made headlines in many parts of the world. This may well be a cause of shame for church and state in Ireland. It may also be a case of how our experience can help the rest of the world. It may be that Ireland is not an exception, but one example of what happens elsewhere.

First of all, I pray that our experience has so raised awareness of the abuse of children that it will make it more difficult for that abuse to be perpetrated or hidden in the future. Part of that awareness, also, may be in realising that in a congregation of 400-500 at Mass on Sundays, there may well be 100 or more who have themselves experienced abuse as children. Without asking that they identify themselves, perhaps the presiding celebrant can, on occasion, say that it is good that they are there; that we, as a church and parish, ask forgiveness for any way in which we have been a cause of their pain; that those of us who have not been subjected to that pain can have little idea of the depth of anguish or sense of being abandoned by God; that, together, we want to build a renewed church. No matter how worthless she or he may have felt, we have been given a new life, a new heart and spirit, as followers of Jesus; each and every person is of immense value as we see in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and we in the church want to make sure that this is what each person experiences in the church.

Another part of the awareness may be in realising that, in the same congregation, there may be an unknown number of men and women who have abused children in various ways. It seems to be a fact that those responsible for such actions rarely acknowledge their responsibility or guilt, and will often continue to abuse. It may seem intractable. A significant proportion of abuse is carried out by adolescents. Pillars of church and community have been known to be involved. And yet they too are called to a new life. For anyone trapped in such a situation, I think sometimes of St Paul at the end of chapter 7 of his letter to the Romans: *the good I want to do, I fail to do; the evil I want to avoid, I find myself doing. Who can save me from this*

doomed body? And yet he is able to continue: Thanks be to God, who has saved me in Christ. And on to the end of chapter 8 of the letter: I am certain of this: neither death nor life ... nor anything whatever will be able to come between us and the love of God known to us in Jesus Christ. For anyone, no matter how deeply mired in sin, there is a new life.

If anything shows clearly the need for salvation, this situation surely is that evidence. If we as a church can now face up honestly to the reality of what has been revealed, and acknowledge how we have gone wrong, and if we can honestly show that we deal whole-heartedly with it without prevarication, this could be a gift and challenge to the rest of the world in doing the same.