

# Know Thyself

– *where reappraisal must begin*

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Given that the Catholic Church worldview owes more to ancient Greek philosophy rather than scripture, it is rather surprising that one of the most famous phrases in philosophy, ‘know thyself’, has yet to be taken on board by the Vatican in the context of the child abuse scandals. The words, written on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi by the Seven Sages of Greece, and espoused by Plato, who taught that the essence of knowledge is self-knowledge, suggest that when scandal occurs, looking to ‘thyself’ is where any reappraisal should begin. While notably active in the context of quashing the discussion about women in ministry, as well as any other issues that strike at the heart of teaching on sexuality, such as homosexuality, priestly celibacy and so on, the Vatican has shown a marked reluctance to address the issue of abuse adequately. It can be argued that this is because it is an issue that incorporates an investigation that must necessarily include Church thinking on celibacy and sexuality.

Studies that examine abuse in the context of the Catholic Church have been conducted in Australia and the USA.<sup>1</sup> In Ireland, Marie Keenan, in her thought-provoking scholarly book, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church* (2012), summarizes many of the studies, their findings and implications. Keenan, an academic social scientist and a practising psychotherapist, also includes a fascinating and insightful account and analysis of her therapy work with the perpetrators of abuse. To date, the critical perspectives shared by authors such as Keenan, and the many other commentators who have written extensively on the need for introspection, as well as the many groups around the world who have called for reform, have been ignored by the Vatican.

A significant factor in the context of the aftermath of the revelations of child abuse is the way in which the Church and the media have ‘explained’ the phenomena in terms of labelling offending priests as flawed individuals or as paedophiles. The Church’s use of the word ‘individual’ is useful in that it suppresses any examination of the role of the institution in the context of abuse. Similarly, labelling priests as paedophiles in the public discourse not only absolves the Church from any responsibility in this regard, but also limits the scope for informed discussion. For instance, abuse carried out by Church personnel is not at a higher percentage than that carried out by the ordinary population. The main threat to children is, sadly, from family members or family friends. Moreover, the majority of ordained priests are not offenders. Indeed, rather than a swathe of evil individuals peppered throughout the institution, what emerges from Keenan’s study are

1 See John Jay College (2011). ‘The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States 1950-2010’. A report Presented to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops by the John Jay College Research Team. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/The-Causes-and-Context-of-Sexual-Abuse-of-Minors-by-Catholic-Priests-in-the-United-States-1950-2010.pdf>. See also, ‘The Truth, Justice and Healing Council Activity Report December 2014’. Report by the Truth, and Healing Council for Australia’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (12 December 2014). Available at <http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/>

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men with an underdeveloped emotional and psychological mindset, living a celibate life that eschews intimacy and in which the difficulties of loneliness, isolation and so on are never addressed either before or after ordination.

Many other factors play a role in serving to influence the skewed choices made by the men in Keenan's study in relation to foisting unacceptable intimacy on children. They include the seminarian training that relies on a morality fixed on absolutes, the perceived 'threat' of women to the celibate man's vocation, the lack of preparation or education about human relationships and celibacy, the 'authority' of the ordained man and the institutional expectation of blind obedience. In concluding her analysis of the factors involved in the actions of the men interviewed, Keenan argues: 'In fact, it is my experience that many clerical men who sexually abuse minors do not fit the psychiatric classification of pedophilia at all' (Keenan 2012: 247-8). Thus, Keenan argues convincingly that her findings support the premise that child abuse in the context of the Catholic Church cannot be understood without considering the crucial inter-relating factors of gender and sexuality, power relations and clerical culture (Keenan 2012: 25). However, the labelling of offenders as 'flawed individuals' or paedophiles has greatly hampered attempts to force the institutional Church to conduct a broad investigation of its thinking and practices, particularly in relation to its theology of sexuality.

Of note in relation to the Catholic Church's stance on sexuality is firstly, that celibacy is considered the norm and secondly, that human sexuality is realized only within marriage. It is chastity, therefore, that is the basis for thinking about sexuality. For instance, in his encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* (On the Regulation of Birth, 25 July 1968), Pope Paul VI (1963-78) reaffirmed traditional Church teaching that preventing pregnancy by abstinence was the only acceptable means of spacing births. In abstinence, he wrote, 'the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature' (Section 16). He then went on to extol the virtues of chastity:

The right and lawful ordering of birth demands, first of all, that spouses fully recognize and value the true blessings of family life and that they acquire complete mastery over themselves and their emotions. For if with the aid of reason and of free will they are to control their natural drives, there can be no doubt at all of the need for self-denial. Only then will the expression of love, essential to married life, conform to right order. This is especially clear in the practice of periodic continence (Section 21).

It is clear from this passage that chastity is intrinsic to the Catholic theology of sexuality. In addition, the use of words and phrases in the passage above such as, 'mastery over', 'reason', 'control' and 'right order', point to the continuing stance in magisterium thinking of celibacy as a superior calling.

Priestly celibacy is a discipline rather than a dogma. In other words, it is practised in imitation of Jesus, rather than imposed as a rule revealed by God. St Paul, following Jesus' example, did not enforce the rule of celibacy, although it was a way of life that he chose for himself. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote: 'I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind' (1 Corinthians 7.7). While expressing his personal opinion that celibacy is best for those who want to dedicate their life to spreading God's word, Paul also intimates that celibacy is 'a particular gift' that is bestowed by God. Consequently, he does not make it a requirement and moreover, does not cite Jesus as the model for celibacy. Rather, he advises: '[L]et each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you' (1 Corinthians 7.17). Similarly, Jesus, while speaking with the Pharisees about marriage, divorce, adultery and celibacy said of the latter: 'Let anyone accept

this who can' (Matthew 19.12). Despite Paul's views, Jesus' words and the fact that Jesus chose married men to follow him, priestly celibacy is mandatory. No weight is given to the idea that all who have a vocation may not be given the 'gift' of celibacy.

The imposition of celibacy also has a direct impact on the status of women. It is no accident that in order to make celibacy attractive as a way of life, sexuality, especially female sexuality, had to be made repugnant. Consequently, women were positioned as the enemy, the temptress who would distract a man from his priestly mission. There are many writings by Church Fathers from earliest times on this theme, wherein woman, as the embodiment of Eve, is presented as the danger to priestly celibacy. Not only does such thinking lessen the responsibility of man for his own sexual behaviour, the consequences of which are still with us,<sup>2</sup> but the idea of woman as the enemy to a life of chastity also has a bearing in the issue of child abuse.

Notably absent from discussions about child abuse is the topic of gender. Keenan found that intimacy with a child emerged as a much lesser moral quandary for an abuser than intimacy with a woman. She writes:

For the clerical offender, sex with women was perceived as the ultimate sin and a fundamental threat to a celibate vocation. [...] Although sex with a boy was wrong and sinful it was seen as the lesser sin and in the past at least, the priest did not feel it would threaten his entire vocation and priestly existence (Keenan 2012: 13).

In other words, the threat of woman, as representative of Eve, the temptress, to the vow of celibacy and the mandate to avoid woman as a result, is so strongly embedded in the mind-set of the celibate priest that satisfying the need for intimacy, by forcing a minor into receiving that intimacy, is a lesser moral dilemma than pursuing intimacy with a grown woman. Thus, while children are, and rightly so, at the forefront of the abuse scandal, the centuries of 'teachings' on women are a significant factor in the choosing of minors as victims.

There are other pertinent statistics in relation to sexuality among Church personnel. As already noted, all priests and religious are obligated to take a vow of celibacy and live as celibates. However, there is evidence suggesting that this is not the case across the board. Keenan reviewed literature on Roman Catholic clergy from a number of sources, including, 'scholarly books and essays, empirical research studies, newspaper reports and some relevant websites' many of which are written by 'priests and religious (male and female)' (Keenan 2012: 54). From her wide-ranging review of the above material, which relates to the years 2000 onwards, she remarks:

A most striking feature of the above examination of the literature on 'normal' clergy is the finding that up to 50% of Roman Catholic clergy (in the studies that have been conducted in the United States) are sexually active at any one time, despite adopting a vow of chastity and a commitment to celibate living (Keenan 2012: 61).

In other words, many Church personnel are failing to adhere to

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Polly Toynbee, 'Misogyny runs so deep in this society, it is even used against abused children', *The Guardian* (7 August 2013). Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/07/misogyny-society-abused-children-predatory>

their own ethos.<sup>3</sup>

The work carried out in Ireland, the USA and Australia suggests that there is no single reason as to why some Church personnel abuse children. While there is little doubt of the existence of some evil individuals, studies support the argument that for the majority of offenders, a myriad of factors played a part in the abuse of minors. It is clear too that the demands of celibacy, juxtaposed with the lack of psychosexual education and the deeply rooted fear of women, are significant factors. Given that St Paul wrote that celibacy was not a gift bestowed on everyone, assuming otherwise has undoubtedly led to much personal suffering, bewilderment and loneliness and for others, the seeking of intimacy in totally inappropriate places. As Keenan argues in 'Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church', 'sexual abuse by Catholic clergy is best understood not as a problem of 'flawed' individuals but as a systemic problem that comprises individual, local organisational and global institutional dimensions' (Keenan 2014: 101).

To conclude, Bishop Emeritus Geoffrey Robinson has offered one reason as to why the Church has failed to respond to the in-depth, carefully collected findings on the issue of child abuse. In the introduction to *For Christ's Sake: End Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church ... For Good*, he writes:

I suggest that the major reason why the Church has not yet seriously looked at causes of abuse is that it fears that any serious and objective study of the causes of abuse would lead to a demand for change in a number of practices, attitudes, laws and even teachings within the Church, and it is quite unwilling to do this.

I suggest he may be right.

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3 Outside the scope of this article, but also pertinent to the issue of abuse, are cases of priests who take advantage of emotionally vulnerable women who seek their advice and help. It has been documented, since the 1990s, that across twenty-three countries in which cultural norms demand that women obey the wishes of men, that nuns have been subjected to abuse and rape by priests. Many have been dismissed from convents for being pregnant or have been forced by the priests in question to have abortions. See Angela Hanley. *Whose à la Carte Menu? Exploring Catholic themes in context* (2014). Dublin: Columba Press, 167-170.