

SCANDAL, ANGER AND ANXIETY

DESMOND O'DONNELL OMI

ANXIETY AND anger are part of life, and some priests recognise this when they modify the prayer before Communion to say, 'Free us from unnecessary anxiety' or something similar. However, over the past few years while counselling individual priests or giving talks to gatherings of hardworking frontline clergy, I sensed that they felt a higher than usual level of anxiety and some degree of anger. I recalled the warning in Proverbs (12.25) that, 'anxiety weighs down the human heart'

Among their main priestly anxieties they named the growing tone-deafness to religion, low Mass attendance, more marriage breakdowns, second relationships, the lost contraception issue, the diminishing desire for auricular Confession, lower numbers in the seminary, some First Communion 'pantomimes', Confirmation sometimes becoming 'the last sacrament', ambiguous faith at baptisms, weddings or funerals, some diocesan curia communication systems, changing parish structures and unfair media coverage.

However, the suffering of sexually abused children and the discovery that an even small proportion of priests are accused of contributing to this, is possibly the most immediate source of clerical anxiety or anger today. This anxiety can be conscious or subconscious, verbalized or silent, vague or focused, and it can easily lessen priestly morale and diminish pastoral energy.

Here I wish to offer a tested technique which can gradually reduce all energy-draining anxiety or anger in a relatively simple way. The use of this technique can change a high level of anxiety into healthy concern, or change

burdensome anger into manageable annoyance. It is called Rational Emotive Therapy and was proposed by Albert Ellis¹.

Ellis points out that negative feelings depend on underlying presuppositions or expectations which we have accepted. He calls these presuppositions our Belief System. (This has nothing to do directly with faith.) An extreme situation is when a person becomes scrupulous *because* he or she believes that a cruel God expects perfect moral behaviour. An everyday example is when a priest becomes discouraged *because* he expects that the church should be full on Sundays, or feels depressed *because* he believes that cohabitation before marriage must never happen, or experiences low morale *because* he believes that priests must always be respected, or feels very angry *because* he believes that scandals should never happen. The '*because*' helps us to identify our underlying Belief System.

It is also identifiable by words like '*must*', '*should*', '*ought*'. In his lectures Ellis often used rhymes to make his point. For instance, because he discovered an alternative to psychoanalysis which claims that dysfunctionality *must* be treated by deep analysis of faulty parental relationships, he gave his students this:

Though my past was rather messy, I am now free to roam. I've stopped my nutty, musty thinking and left the old folks at home.

He points out that many of our *must-should-ought* beliefs or expectations are irrational or what he describes as 'nutty, musty thinking'. He also advised: 'never *should* on yourself'.

Another psychologist, Beck², speaks about unproductive ideas which lead to a cognitive bias. Both psychologists stated that un-

derlying beliefs which lead to stressful feelings need to be questioned, if anxiety is to be lessened.

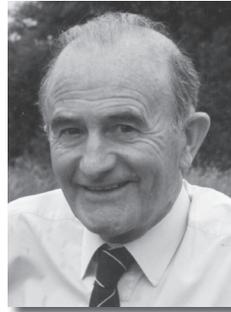
They recommended a constant readiness to dispute any Belief System that leads to distorted judgements which then result in excessively negative feelings. For instance, if one believes that the Church *must* always be manifestly holy, one will be excessively depressed when clerical crimes are made public. If one believes that all priests *must* live fully chaste lives and that clerical failures *must* not happen or *must not* be exposed, one will certainly be unnecessarily anxious about scandals and reports on them. Life would be better if people never failed, but to think that this *must* always be so is, as Ellis says, ‘nutty, musty’ thinking.

Feeling extreme anxiety because someone is unjust to me is built on the irrational belief that everyone *should* always treat me fairly. Of course it would be ideal if this were so. It would also have been ideal if the crime of paedophilia did not exist in society or if sexually immature men had never been ordained. But to say that these ideals *must* always happen reflects unrealistic thinking. To dispute this Belief System of unreal expectations will, in time, move one from excessive anxiety to healthy disquiet, and from oppressive anger to healthy annoyance. Here are a few current examples.

Challenged Faith

Our Belief System may be telling us that people’s faith *should* never be tested by clerical failure or that any such failure *must* damage their faith. But are these expectations true? What does history tell us? In the past, the faith of believers was severely challenged by much greater clerical scandals when, for example, a number of popes were warmongers and certainly less than chaste. How unreal—not to say unfair—it is to expect that any pope or bishop *must* be perfect.

When our anxiety results from the belief



Desmond O'Donnell is an Oblate priest and a registered psychologist. He worked for twenty-eight years in Australia.

that people’s faith *should* not be tested or that it *must* be undermined by clerical failure, it is time to ask if this is true. And it is worth noting that much of the negative reaction comes, understandably, from people who were already hurt, from those who dislike church leaders or from some journalists who need a ‘good’ story. Most people are less than greatly bothered by the scandals, and in their wisdom they recognise that—as one lady said to me, ‘a few bad apples do not mean that the entire basket is bad’.

Decreased Mass-going

Our Belief System may also be telling us that scandals *must* result in lower Mass attendance. But is this true? There is no evidence that these are connected. Less frequent church attendance in all faiths was already on the way for other reasons, and perhaps it can be predicted to continue, as it did in France, Flanders, Spain, Quebec and is now happening in Malta and Poland (15% attend Sunday Mass in Warsaw). All of this social and religious change is well beyond clerical control. It was certainly not caused by, nor can it be changed by the priests who are already offering excellent liturgies. To set up expectations and to say that it *should not* happen is in Ellis’ phrase ‘nutty, musty thinking’ which can drain away valuable pastoral energy. While less people at Mass is far from ideal, strong anxiety or guilt about it is again built on a disputable *must*.

* * *

Respect for Clergy

Must clerical failures lead to a lessening respect for priests? Or *must* we priests be less respected because some have betrayed us? *Must* priests continue to receive the same respect as in the past, even when they do not fail? We know now that much of what was regarded as respect in the past was not the real thing. We underestimate the feet-on-the-ground lives of people who are able to make realistic distinctions between the criminal behaviour of the few and the dedicated pastoral activity of the great majority. It is also good to be aware that we live in a great age when all respect has to be earned. It is safe to say that we can rely on people, whatever their faith, to give us the respect we earn as individuals.

Sincere people focus their reaction on accurately reported clerical crime rather than speak generically about 'paedophile priests'. When the first revelation of the scandals emerged, the Greeley-Ward survey conducted in the year 2000 found that the great majority of Irish people still had deep respect for their local priests. And for most people the word priesthood can be vague; there are only the individual priests in their parish and priests who are their friends.

Decreasing Vocations

Must the drop in vocations to priesthood be connected to clerical failures? A few thousand young Irish men and women from dioceses throughout the country accept priests' invitations to serve the sick in Lourdes every year. They do this at their own expense and they attend all the devotions of the pilgrimage. Many dedicated young people have also given of their time and skills to developing countries for many years. So, lack of faith, or failure in generosity, or disillusionment with clerical failures are not the cause of the vocation problem; it is much deeper than that.

Is anxiety built on the disappointed expectation that priestly vocations *must* con-

tinue to increase? And if it is, we can ask is this expectation reality-based? Vocation numbers have been falling for a long time, and while the present model of priesthood—male, celibate and life-commitment—is used, it seems that the fall can be predicted to continue for the foreseeable future. The recent increase in seminary applicants would seem to be good news provided that we continue to discourage men who seek priesthood as an opportunity to enhance their need for power and status.

It is realistic to recognise that permanent commitment to all ways of life is decreasing, as modernity marches on. Not ideal, but who can say that it *must* never happen? While we continue to pray for and encourage carefully discerned vocations, over-anxiety about the lessening numbers is, once again, wasted pastoral energy. God may be saying something to us that we are unwilling to hear just yet.

Image of the Church

Some priests have excessive anxiety built on the expectation that the image of the Church *must* not be damaged because of the scandals. The underlying belief here is that the church *must* be perfect despite the often quoted '*Ecclesia semper reformanda*'. And at the same time unless we believe that all journalists and letter-writers reflect the view of the entire population, there is no hard evidence to substantiate that the image of the Church has seriously diminished for most believers. The recent scandals have given those who were already disaffected or who were already anti-church plenty of stones to throw, but whether the average Irish person or Church-goer has a lower opinion of the Church is not at all clear.

One could also ask, does any reality called 'the Church' really exist in the minds of most people? For the majority, the Church is embodied in their local priests and in the Mass-going congregation.

* * *

Media Coverage

Judging by priestly conversation, many feel strongly about how some of the media presents the Church, and how it seems to highlight clerical failures. Have we an underlying belief that the media *should* always present news about the Church accurately or favourably? If we have, the media will continue to cause all of us considerable anxiety or even anger. But our expectation of the media may in itself be biased by our judgement of what is fair. Surely it can be expected that a Church which professed and preached high ideals can now be questioned and criticised about its teaching on sexuality and the practice of some of its ministers. And we know that all editors must choose a slant in the presentation of news, just as our Catholic newspapers do. We can be more realistic about press coverage of clerical failures, just as politicians and other public figures have to be every day.

More Careful Prediction

The fact all that men who might abuse children were not eliminated prior to ordination has caused considerable anxiety to many priests. It is a laudable hope that it will never happen again. But given human fallibility, *must*

it be so? Anxiety can be lessened by the fact that for many years the bishops have insisted upon professional diagnostic testing for every student in our national seminary. It is noteworthy that since this initiative was introduced, together with the work of a skilled formation team, no instance of paedophile activity has been reported.

Some very recent research and opinion suggest that the risk of clerical sexual abuse of children may be partially systemic, built into present church discipline and practice on which priestly anxiety would be wasted. On this broader aspect of the subject I recommend two articles³ which in my opinion give most balanced presentations. I also recommend two books *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church* (Robinson) and *Freeing Celibacy* (Cozzens).⁴

Turning unrealistic ideals into imperative expectations can have crippling consequences. At any moment in our lives, excessive anxiety or anger about the scandals or about any of the other longer-standing problems mentioned at the beginning of this article, can be effectively lessened by the use of Rational Emotive Therapy. For all priests, this technique can prevent the loss of valuable pastoral energy at any time. St. Peter gives us the final word, 'Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you' (1 Pt.5.6)

NOTES

1. Ellis, A (1984) 'Rational Emotive Therapy' in *Current Psychotherapies*. Corsini, R.J. (Ed) Peacock Press.
2. Beck A.T.(1986) 'Cognitive Therapy' in *The Behavioural Therapist*. 9,2-3.
3. Keenan, M. *The Clergy Offender as Other* (Responding to the Ryan Report) Columba Press 2009.

Walsh, W. 'The Ryan Report' (*The Furrow*) Nov 2009.

4. Robinson, Bishop Geoffrey, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2008.
- Donald B. Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2006.