

# IN THE NAME-OF-THE-FATHER

## *The Vatican's Secret Re-visited*

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Abstract: The *omphalus* of the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is yet to be located and exposed. This paper struggles to provide a brief account of one attempted search and its findings.

The contours of silence that have surrounded the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church have been clearly defined in the work of Geoffrey Robertson (2010) and Kieran Tapsell (2014). We are left with no illusion—the Vatican has protected its culpable priests with the consequence that more and more children were abused. Central to this situation is the role played by Vatican regulation. For well nigh a century a series of Vatican proclamations has ruled that persons with professional knowledge of certain criminal behaviour by priests observe inviolably the strictest confidentiality, commonly known as *The Secret of the Holy Office* and later known as *The Pontifical Secret*. Although there have been revisions of the foundational 1922 *Crimen Sollicitationis* (see Tapsell, 2014, pp. 127-140), due to church rules and canon law, a culture of silence has been deeply embedded within the mind-set of the hierarchy who deal with allegations of clergy misbehaviour. In addition, the process of dismissal from the priesthood became almost impossible over time. Together with the centuries-old 'benefit of clergy' the foregoing has provided a shelter so enabling paedophiles amongst the clergy to remain without public detection.

The Vatican's secret (The Pontifical Secret) has not saved its priests. It has not prevented scandal. Indeed, it is itself a scandal. But something further to this issue of secrecy and silence must be thrown into bold relief. The

implementation of the decree of secrecy has been the means by which the church has averted a profound theological crisis. To be more specific, the secret has functioned to avert a theological crisis. It provides the means by which the crisis has been avoided. Consequently, it marks a point that is productive of the most unwitting, intense defence by church personnel who garner the anger of both victims and of the general public in reaction to the revelations made as a result of numerous inquiries and commissions across the world. Exactly what is being defended here? The defence pertains to one of the most fundamental concepts within the church's vocabulary, namely, 'priest'. How is this so?

### *In the Name-of-the-Father*

The term 'paedophile priest' is often employed in discussion focussed on the current crisis. This terminology suggests two separable concepts (i) paedophile and (ii) priest. In the instance of Catholic priests this separation cannot be made. If a priest sexually abuses a child he is then a *paedophilepriest*. I coin this term to give recognition to the crucial distinction to be drawn between a man who sexually abuses a child and a priest who sexually abuses a child. A priest who abuses does so specifically as a priest. By definition *he uses his priesthood to gain access to the child* and his priesthood, in the Catholic tradition, holds immense power and so persuasive capacity.

A priest is nominated by the word 'Father'. He stands as representative of the 'Father' and this 'Father' is not any father. He is *the* Father—the One who is held to be all in all, the Alpha

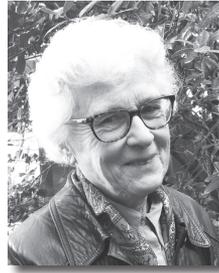
and the Omega. The priest, as priest, acts in the Name-of-the-Father. He says Mass in the name-of-the-Father; forgives sin in the Name-of-the-Father; baptizes in the Name-of-the-Father; blesses in the Name-of-the-Father—he is perceived to live his life in the Name-of-the-Father. This is precisely what is held to set him apart from all others. So, when a priest sexually abuses a child, he does so in the Name-of-the-Father both in the ingenuous, non-discriminating mind of the child and in his own mind because he knows the nature of the power that his position holds over others and uses it to gain his own sexual advantage. Thus, when a priest sexually abuses a child he is nothing less than a *paedophilepriest*.

### **'The Impossible'**

But, a *paedophilepriest* is a theological impossibility. A man cannot be both a paedophile and a priest simultaneously. If he is a paedophile he cannot be a priest, and if he is a priest he cannot be a paedophile—that is, unless the Father is perverse. The latter proposition is anathema within Catholic doctrine. It is a sheer impossibility.

Hence, to speak of a *paedophilepriest* brings us face to face with what can only be said to be a meaningless concept. A *paedophilepriest* is a word that carries no meaning. When faced with something that has no meaning we are in the field of trauma. We have nowhere to place the experience, no frame of reference from which it can gain meaning and so be managed by we who are first and foremost beings who speak. If we do not know what to do with this nameless experience, ultimately it will do with us. If the current frame of reference proves inadequate to the needs of experience it will eventually collapse and a new construction is necessitated. Yet, it is precisely this notion of trauma that has been averted by the church. How?

The Vatican secret allows the church to hide from itself that a *paedophilepriest* is not a priest and a paedophile. As far as the church is concerned, the priest can remain a priest while



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being treated for his paedophilia. The church splits 'the impossible' and so averts any recognition of what is real. Consequently, since 1922, the church has never acknowledged the truth of the *paedophilepriest* and so, for decade upon decade, has preserved the concept 'priest' as absolutely separate from that of paedophile. By so doing, it is enabled to maintain a theological frame that is in no way disturbed because the frame has not been subjected to 'the impossible' and been found wanting.

I need to make clear here that the argument of this paper applies to all abuse by Catholic priests, brothers and nuns alike. The only difference is that nuns and brothers are seen to be on a lower rung in the hierarchy than priests where closeness to the Father is concerned and are therefore considered of less theological consequence. Nonetheless, they are held to belong to the same holy and powerful family, all working and acting in the Name-of-the-Father. Hence, the same 'impossible' experience occurs for the victim of abuse in each instance.

Clearly the potential for a collapse of an inadequate theological framework for our times enters the realm of very high stakes. The church may have avoided the collapse of its own theological frame which supports and gives meaning to the concept 'priest', but the experience of this very same 'impossibility' resides elsewhere—namely, in the instigation of the trauma of the abused.

### **'The Impossible' Re-located**

Victims of a *paedophilepriest* are those who

are faced ultimately with an experience of 'the impossible'. When a *paedophilepriest* abuses a child, the latter experiences something for which there is no name, yet something that is absolutely and irrevocably real. The child is faced with a man who is believed, and claims, to act in the Name-of-the-Father. He bears the name 'Father' with the nomination being employed as a proper noun. He represents God. He stands in for God. Yet, he acts in a manner that is beyond the child's comprehension and the child is faced with 'the impossible' to say, 'the impossible' to bear.

A child cannot draw upon the Vatican's secret to avert the collapse of his or her world. All the familiar and anchoring coordinates that give meaning and stability to his existence are at risk of collapse and in many cases do collapse either at that point or at some time later. The victim cannot make sense of the experience wherein a 'supposed priest' abuses him or her sexually. In many such instances none of what takes place has meaning for the abused. 'Father' touching his or her body is akin to an invasion of self by an unknown and unnamed being from an unnamed elsewhere. Children, as is the case for all speaking beings, cannot deal with the meaningless dimension of their experience, in this context, an experience that harbours a strain of aggression, if not violence.

The consequence for each will be singular. Some experience a total collapse of their psychological hold on the world. Subsequently, they spend the remainder of their lives cobbling and re-cobbling together the psychological frame that provides them with an identity and the means of managing their fraught existence. Unexpectedly, their fragile worlds can unwind once more and they feel themselves slip helplessly into a void of pain-drenched inertia. Many are threatened by the paedophile and some believe themselves to be touched, if not penetrated, by evil. In an attempt to make at least partial sense of their experience some consider themselves evil.

Such a construction may well save them from the abyss, but simultaneously carries within it the seeds of destruction.

In his evidence to The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Stephen Thomas Woods, a victim of both religious and clergy abuse, describes how he now understands the effect of his past upon his life. The collapse of his world and his failure to understand his situation are dominant themes throughout. As an intelligent young man he had to stop studying: "... after another breakdown... I was too tired and too exhausted to continue...". He reports the presence of a repetitive voice in the back of his mind reinforcing the ideas planted by his perpetrators that he was bad, that he was evil; "My self esteem was utterly shattered and ruined. I have also had a hyper awareness of potential threats which has only deepened my anxieties." He explains that when one perpetrator got off his charge in relation to his own case, "I had a total breakdown. I became suicidal...". Telling, too, is his reference to the quality of professional help he received. He mentions one competent clinical psychologist who "was brilliant at joining the dots that I couldn't, and making sense of some of the more obscure feelings and attitudes I had. That is, why I felt so bad and down about myself; why I kept pushing and falling, and pushing and falling" (Transcript Royal Commission, Day - C079, 8346-7, 21/5/15). The impact of 'the impossible' on his life, an 'impossible' that should have been acknowledged and dealt with at an institutional level, could hardly be more life-devouring. To listen to his evidence is to be exposed to the breadth and depth of what is at stake for those caught in the current of the re-located 'impossible'.

At the risk of over-simplification, suffice it to say in the present context that not all are damaged so severely—in some cases a victim's psychological structure remains firm. Consequently, such a victim is able to push the experience aside with the chance that he or she may deal with it at some later time.

Nevertheless, a price is always paid by the victim—for the traumatic experience has a life of its own and has a type of haunting presence that is never far away.

I have argued that the secrecy of the Vatican in regard to paedophilia has functioned to avert a theological crisis in reference to the concept 'priest'. By covering-up paedophilia, the church avoids a confrontation with 'the impossible' that the *paedophilepriest* presents to it. The truth of real *paedophilepriests* will not be silenced. It speaks within the lives of the victims who, as individuals, are fated to be confronted by 'the impossible' with all its devastating effects. The threat that pertains to the theological underpinnings of the institutional church has fallen with a vengeance into the laps of children. 'The impossible' has been re-located and, not surprisingly, the responsibility for the outcome is a matter of great and growing community concern.

### ***Responsibility and Response-ability***

With marked reference to the Catholic Church, it is not by chance that the issue of responsibility has emerged repeatedly throughout the Victorian Senate Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organizations 2013, and throughout the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse currently under way. Precisely who bears the responsibility for the crimes of paedophilia committed by clergy—the individual criminal and/or the institutional church? I do not wish to venture into fine legal or other complex details here, but I do want to make two pertinent observations.

Archbishop Denis Hart was pressed on the issue of responsibility at the Victorian Senate Inquiry. In his closing address he publicly admitted to the church's fault-line: "There is anger at the appalling harm that was done to children, anger at the grief and pain inflicted on parents who still live today with feelings of

guilt, bewilderment and betrayal, and anger at the fact that the church failed its most vulnerable by *letting this happen*" (emphasis my own) (2013, p.51). Here he moves closer to the yet-to-be said by the institutional church. How did the church "let this happen"? Why did it "let this happen"? Did it let it happen or were its laws and regulations productive of its happening?

He continues thus: "I understand that the community is looking for someone to take responsibility for the terrible acts that occurred. I take responsibility" (p.51). What precisely does this mean in principle and in practice? Earlier in the interrogation he was insistent that all crimes were to be pinned back on the culpable person: "Obviously it became pretty clear that of all the cases that we have had in these years in Melbourne something like 58 per cent of all these evil things can be sheeted back to 12 priests. It is really shocking" (p.15). Yes, indeed, this does shock. But the shock is that a 'supposed priest' is the criminal. Here again we have the instance of the *paedophilepriest*—it shocks because it is 'impossible'. Further to this he says: "... these awful criminals are secretive and cunning and devious, and they have kept their evil deed secret" (p.15). But it is the church that kept these crimes secret, the church knew of "this awful evil"(p.15). So, in what sense does the Archbishop take responsibility for the terrible acts that occurred?

Notably, nowhere in his evidence does the Archbishop, on behalf of the institutional church, forthrightly acknowledge, or take responsibility for, the secrecy imposed by the Vatican which is at the root of "this awful evil". This is so, even though the issue of Vatican decrees was specifically raised. Archbishop Hart is not personally responsible for individual behaviour, but as a spokesperson for the institutional church he can and must take responsibility for the fact that this behaviour was possible for someone who bore the official title 'priest' with the full knowledge of the hierarchy.

Cardinal George Pell was likewise pressed on the issue of responsibility at the Royal Commission. Having accepted that the church is morally responsible for the sexual abuse of children by “church officials” (C041, C4499, 21/08/2014), he said that “what from a Christian point we might decide is inappropriate probably is totally appropriate in a legal sense ...” (C4535). It was clear from his now infamous, misleading ‘trucking’ analogy that he did not consider the church legally responsible for the criminal behaviour of the offending individual. Crucial to all discussion is a matter that is completely missing in the evidence proffered—an acknowledgement of the Vatican’s secret, both the root cause and overarching umbrella of the church’s response to its self-knowledge.

Missing in the above is evidence that the institutional church *holds itself to account* for the sexual abuse of countless children. Missing is an open acknowledgement of the influence of the Vatican’s secret and canon law in the shaping of the trauma borne throughout this past century by countless innocents, their families and communities. Until the institutional church reaches out and *takes* responsibility for *making possible, if not probable*, the criminal behaviour of some of its priests, it will be unable to employ its otherwise powerful and healing potential as an institution with an immense capacity for restorative and life-giving response-ability.

### **Conclusion**

In Australia, as elsewhere in the world, the Catholic Church is currently being held to

account for the criminal actions perpetrated by some amongst its clergy. To be held accountable is one thing. To hold oneself accountable, and consequently exhibit appropriate response-ability, is entirely another. With the revelation of the official secrecy of the Vatican one might imagine that the church would be forced to take responsibility in the instance of the paedophile conduct of its members, but this would bring it to the precipice, a situation the church resists at all costs. As matters now stand, the price for this resistance is paid by the victim, sometimes with his or her own life.

It is not only the cover-up that must be acknowledged. What must be admitted by the church is the way in which the cover-up functions to move, to transpose a potential crisis for it as an institution, to the world of the individual victim wherein it brings about a trauma of inestimable consequence. The cover-up of paedophilia, this protection of the key concept ‘priest’, is the genesis of a palpable defensiveness that permeates the genuine efforts made by the church to address the abuse scandal with compassion.

The institutional church will fail in its attempt to assuage the anger and pain caused by its action until this buried issue is brought into the open where it can be acknowledged and dealt with *at an institutional level*. The Pontifical Secret may be a secret no more, but the *omphalos*, the now fragile concept ‘priest’, remains unrecognized and so unchallenged as it continues to lie in wait ....

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