

THE ABUSE OF MINORS

A Cinema Resource

PETER MALONE MSC

IN TERMS OF the quality of life, one of the greatest threats is abuse of the young. Not only has it been a horrendous revelation in recent times that adults at home, in institutions and in organised rings have been physically and sexually assaulting children, but that members of churches and an alarmingly high number of clergy and members of religious congregations have been accused of this kind of activity and have been found guilty in courts and have been jailed.

This survey of films will confine itself to sexual molestation and abuse of minors, specifically young boys and adolescents, with reference to the church and secular cases.

Until the 1980s, most people did not think of going to the police to press criminal charges. There were very few precedents. We have come to learn that concerned parents did go to ecclesiastical authorities but that there was a lack of awareness about how serious the matters really were, that there were few protocols to guide church leaders on how to deal with clergy misconduct of this nature, that there was an immediate concern for the welfare of the accused rather than concern and compassion for the complainants and a belated switch to language of victims and perpetrators. The behaviour was secret, hidden, smoothed over with lying deceptions by perpetrators, the exercise of emotional blackmail and the reinforcing of guilt feelings in the victims. While errant clergy were moved from place to place to avoid scandal without much realisation that they would offend again, or were sent to institutes for therapy, there was little help, counselling or compensation for the victims, something which has been, to

some extent, reversed more recently. In fact, worldwide, secular and church authorities are still trying to grapple with psychological understanding of the mind and emotions of an abuser.

While many dioceses and religious orders, especially in English-speaking countries, have taken some very serious steps to do the right thing for victims and to deal honestly and justly with the perpetrators, the American experience of 2002, which led to so many victims making accusations with consequent financial compensatory claims that have bankrupted several dioceses, has continued to impact on so many dimensions of church life: the role of the priest, the psychological and emotional health and maturity of men and women in responsible ecclesiastical roles, the erosion of trust among the faithful, the enormous anger and resentment, the long-term ill-effects of abuse of the victims.

The government investigation in Ireland over almost a decade, government enquiries and the Royal Commission in Australia, mean that the issues are continually before the public and will continue to be for some years to come.

There have been a number of movies dramatising this theme. It is 25 years since a television film about the first reported case of abuse of a boy in Louisiana in the mid-1980s, *Judgment*, was screened.

This article considers the five periods of five years over that quarter of a century, to highlight what was emerging in the public arena during those years and indicate some of the issues in the films which were made and released at that time. Cinema is a mirror of society rather than a shaper of society. A film

can be in pre-production, production and post-production for several years, so there is no instant reflection, as is possible in the print media, radio and television. Nevertheless, in these days when films are seen on television, can be rented or downloaded, and are continually repeated, it means that the films can make some contribution to awareness of sexual abuse.

1990-1995

Background

News of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy was not prominent at the beginning of the 1990s. During this period, however, more and more cases were revealed, especially in English-language countries, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia. It was also at this period, that the first case of a priest in Australia sentenced to prison was publicised.

Church officials responded with plans for the writing of a document, with protocols, as well as pastoral exhortations for the clergy. In 1994, Catholics in Europe commented adversely on sexual abuse of minors as a phenomenon of the English-speaking church, something that would not happen in Europe.

The films

As mentioned already, *Judgment*, a film for television was screened in 1990. It was concerned with the first reported case of abuse of a boy by a priest in Louisiana in the 1980s. David Strathairn played the priest in question. For audiences at the time, it was a strong and surprising drama, material that they were not used to seeing. David Strathairn's performance is well worth seeing as he embodies a range of emotions of a lonely priest, a predatory priest, an exposed priest. *Judgment* anticipated the huge outcry about church procedures in the United States in 2002. It also shows the



Peter Malone MSC, former lecturer at the Yarra Theological Union, edited Compass, 1972-1998. He headed OCIC and SIGNIS, the Catholic Church's international organisations for Media, 1999-2005. He recently published An Ever Widening Screen, a Memoir (Connor Court, Ballarat).

response of the Bishop and his Vicar General, focusing on juridical issues before pastoral issues towards the victim and his family.

Soon after, 1992, the Canadian production, *The Boys of St Vincent*, dramatized the true story of an orphanage with some of the Brothers on the staff abusing their charges. As with *Judgment*, this was new on television screens, a certain amount of disbelief that such events could take place—only to be verified on a much more global scale a few years later. The impact of the film in Canada, with Canadians looking at their own scandal, led to a sequel in 1993, *The Boys of St Vincent, 15 Years Later*, which focused on the court cases against the staff and the traumatic effect abuse had had on the boys as they grow into adults.

A secular-themed television film worth noting is *Bump in the Night*, 1991, a story of a mother searching for her very little son who had been abducted. But the portrait of the abductor, a University literature professor, played by Christopher Reeve, enables the audience to understand something of the mentality of the paedophile, an adult man who seems to be comfortable only in the company of a child, taking him to the zoo, talking to him at his level, showing the emotional retardation of this kind of molester, playing with him as if he was a young boy himself, his appreciation of himself as being tender and loving to the boy. Later films will explore this mentality of

the paedophile.

There are also two different films from this period. *Lawnmower Man* based on a Stephen King story, 1992, shows a physically abusive priest whose sadistic behaviour and beatings leads to his being violently killed by the victim, a simple gardener, whose name is significantly, Jobe. He lives behind the church, tends the grounds, talks to the crucifix as he cleans the church. The abuse theme is not to the fore but it is presented quite powerfully.

Justice and scandals were beginning to emerge, when the thriller, *Primal Fear*, was released in 1995. It is basically a courtroom drama and murder mystery. It uses a church scandal as a basis for the plot. An Archbishop in Chicago, is savagely murdered. It emerges that he had hired adolescents to perform sexual acts in front of a video camera. The killing is vengeful, retaliation for the humiliation and shame. This was quite shocking, the episcopal behaviour as well as the visualising of the performances. For a mainstream film, starring Richard Gere, it seemed to give permission for more explicit films to come.

A film about the relationship of an adult male with a young child, not explicitly sexual, but intimating the possibility, was *Man Without a Face*, 1993, a film directed by Mel Gibson who played the central character. At its release, it seemed to present intimations of the sinister.

For a comparison with the abuse of a pre-adolescent daughter by her father, and the consequences for the daughter and the mother, one of the best Stephen King adaptations, *Dolores Claiborne*, moved the general audience with horror at abuse in a non-religious context.

1996-2000

Background

In 1996, the Australian church, dioceses and religious congregations, published

Towards Healing. It was striking at the time. The Archdiocese of Melbourne, with Archbishop Pell, decided to have its own protocols, *The Melbourne Response*, also promulgated late in 1996.

While *Towards Healing* was a breakthrough at the time, it can be seen in retrospect that many of those applying it had limited awareness, were prone to be concerned about the clergy, financial responsibilities and payments, more than concern about the victims. With the Australian Royal Commission, the criticisms and limitations of *Towards Healing* have been aired in considerable detail—perhaps obscuring stories which show the benefit of those who followed through with greater sensitivity.

In 1995-1996, the auxiliary Bishop of Canberra-Goulburn, Patrick Power, concerned about the issues with interest in the institutes in the United States for therapy for priest-offenders, went to St Luke's, Maryland, and participated in the three-month course to understand and appreciate what it was trying to do. The Australian Church set up *Encompass*.

The films

The 1996 release of an Italian film, *Pianese Nunzio, 14 a Maggio/ Pianese Nunzio, 14 in May*, was more than surprising to an English-language audience. From the point of view of the film, Italians viewed paedophilia not nearly as stringently as those in English-speaking countries. The principal character is a crusading priest in Naples, a champion of the poor. He is confronted by criminal elements in the city as he fights for justice. In his personal life he is in a relationship with a 13-year-old boy. This relationship seems to be presented, if not favourably, at least without any explicit condemnation. But his enemies use the relationship to destroy him.

With many scandals are yet to come to light in some countries in Asia and Africa, it was surprising to see in 1999, an Indian film, *Split*

Wide Open, about changes in lifestyle in Mumbai through the influence of media talkback shows from the West opening up Indian society to sex topics more explicitly. Yet also included was a sub-plot where a religious brother is presented sympathetically, praised for his work with street kids and social justice issues in the slums. He also has an intimate relationship with a young boy. *Split White Open* indicates how much could emerge from Asian countries. Already in the late 1980s, the Philippines most prominent director, Lino Brocka, and his associates made quite a number of films during the 1990s about the exploitation of boys and young men (including by military and naval personnel from the former US base at Subic Bay) the macho dancers, the prostitutes, many of whom are trying to raise money for their impoverished families. Brocka's most notable film was *Macho Dancer*, 1989.

A comparison of how an American films treated this kind of infatuation and relationship, again in the secular setting, is seen in *Happiness*, 1999. Among a range of sexual issues was the attraction of a father to the schoolboy friends of his 11-year-old son. Dylan Baker's performance portrayed the torment of this man, the tactics and rationalisations he used and the shame of his exposure. This character appears in a sequel, *Life During Wartime* (2009), this time played by Ciaran Hinds.

The principal American film this period was *Sleepers*, 1996, including a priest character. However, the basic story is secular. A group of young boys in a juvenile institution were assaulted by one of the supervisors. As adults, they combine to get their revenge by taking him to court, even persuading their priest friend from the neighbourhood, Robert De Niro, to perjure himself during the trial although what he said was the moral truth.

An important film for television, *Indictment: The McMartin Trial*, 1996, raised the issue about memories and false memories, based on actual events in California during

the later 1980s. The McMartin family owns a pre-school, finds itself arrested and charged with a range of offences, many of which are bizarre. Three generations of women go to jail, but the main suspicion is on the son, a dropout who is good-natured but his track record of unreliability does his credibility a great deal of damage. The case went on for seven years, attracting huge media attention (and blame) until all the members of the family were acquitted.

Indictment sets its scene particularly well and shows that it is possible to have widespread abuse in the teaching situation. However, the film also highlights difficulties about memory and suggestion. The film shows how the whole case was initiated by a psychologically disturbed mother with family problems. The fears of abuse snowballed with parents up in arms and children making all kinds of accusations, many of them outlandish. A lynching atmosphere developed. The experts who worked with the children are ultimately shown to have had very limited training, used dubious methods to elicit information from the children and worked on the presumption of guilt on the part of the McMartins. The children, whose interviews were taped but not used in their entirety by the prosecuting team because of lack of time, tell more and more preposterous stories.

Indictment is a cautionary story concerning uncovering repressed memories, not often the subject of films, and concerning children's being susceptible to suggestion.

2001-2005

Background

This was the time when sexual abuse cases were frequently in the headlines, the Catholic Church beginning to accept that this was a reality of the Church's life and that it had to be faced, an examination of conscience.

This came to a head in 2002 when, after the

focus on prominent cases in the Archdiocese of Boston, the American church had its '*annus horribilis*'. Many victims of abuse and molestation made themselves known to authorities. It was a harrowing year for these victims with their memories and hurts and for their families. It was also a harrowing year for many an authority in the Church, from bishops to diocesan directors of communication who had to find ways of responding to media demands while always offering compassion to those who suffered. It was a year of apologies. It was a year of judicial proceedings and attempts to formulate appropriate protocols in the American church. The bishops had to face up to the realities and the need for investigation, making the decision that there would be 'zero tolerance'. In 2003 there was a meeting, in the Vatican, of the American cardinals.

In Australia, there was an accusation made against Cardinal Pell and he showed bishops what should be done if they were the subject of complaint. He stood down until the case was resolved and he was able to resume his duties. A number of American bishops did not follow this example.

With the death of John Paul II in 2005, there was some consideration of how Cardinal Ratzinger handled cases at the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, and what he would do about the abuse scandals as Benedict XVI.

The films

This was the period in which quite a number of significant films were released, films focusing on the sexual abuse of minors, especially young boys.

Many of the scandals in Ireland had been. *Song for a Raggy Boy* (2003) was significant, based on a novel by Patrick Galvin who spoke about the effect of writing the book and of collaborating on the film as an 'exorcism' of the past for himself. The film is set in 1939 in a school reformatory for boys, some younger than 12, managed by the local bishop with a

priest in charge and staffed by brothers. The brother-prefect is a stern disciplinarian who resorts to excessive physical punishment and humiliation of the boys. One brother is a sexual abuser. There is only one sequence of such abuse, visually reticent, but all the more horrendous because of this. It is a reminder of the pathology of the brother and, particularly, the pain of the reluctant victim who speaks of this in the confessional and is advised to keep what has happened to himself.

Song for a Raggy Boy, like other Irish films and their presentation of dominant clergy raise pertinent questions about the severity of the Irish Church, and the collaboration with the state in running institutions and using the same methods of discipline and punishment prevalent in those times in state and other institutions. The film is also a reminder that religious men and seminarians who entered in their mid-teens and underwent severe formation, absorbed it and saw it as the pattern for their ministry, applying it sometimes in unconscious compensation for their lack of emotional development. Two films about abuse of young women in Irish work institutions in the 1960s were *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Sinners* (both 2002).

Meanwhile in Spain, Pedro Almodovar, the country's leading director, often provocative in his attitude towards the Catholic Church (critical of Opus Dei in his film, *Matador*). When Almodovar announced production of *Mal Educacion/Bad Education*, there were immediate claims that the film would be anti-clerical. It would be a film about his own experiences of Catholic education in the schools of the 1960s. However, Almodovar disclaimed the anti-clerical charge, saying that had he made the film 20 years earlier, it would have been quite anti-clerical. He said that he had mellowed and that, although he does not have what he calls the 'luxury of believing in God', he values much of what he experienced in the church (especially liturgies, celebrations and art). He also said that the priests at school said that watching films was a sin so he had to

choose sin. These themes are incorporated into *Bad Education*.

While the abuse issue is important, the director spends more time showing the emotional behaviour of the abusing priest, his obsession and emotional immaturity, and puts more blame on how the priest handles the situation and jealously exploits his authority and power within the school. Later we see the priest in real life, having left the priesthood and married, but still a sexual predator.

As with other directors from continental Europe, Almodovar shows some compassion for the emotions of the perpetrators. He creates a powerful scene where the priest rector of the school sits in rapt attention at the community table while the ten year old boy with whom he is infatuated sings a song for his birthday. While his sympathies are with the victims, he also raises questions about adolescent attitudes to sexuality, especially in the context of Catholic upbringing, Church teaching and a sense of sin. Audiences will have a great deal to think about concerning the characters, about what is real, about what is memory, about sexual orientation, about sexual intimacy, about childhood experiences and their effect on adult development or the impeding of development, about moral choices and about God and religion.

By 2005, a film had been made about several cases in Boston, *Our Fathers*, first screened on the US cable channel, *Showtime*, in May 2005.

Our Fathers was based on a book, *Our Fathers: the Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal*, by David France who had covered the story when a senior editor at *Newsweek*. It is a dramatised interpretation of the year in Boston which began with the Father Geoghegan trial, continued with other priests being accused and ended with the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law. The film is generally carefully written, giving voice to a range of perspectives. The legal aspects of the case are frequently centre-screened.

Our Fathers shows the victims of abuse in their adult years and the damage that they still bear, ranging from low self-esteem and marital difficulties, even to suicide. It uses discreetly filmed flashbacks (with the emphasis on verbal communication rather than visuals of the molestations) to bring home the reality of the abuse within the context of family life, school, church and the plausible pretexts that the clergy used to deceive parents and rationalize their behaviour with the children.

The film, which starts with Fr Geoghan's ordination and the bishop asking the seminary rector whether this candidate was worthy, also fills in aspects of the accused priests' lives and behaviour. Opinions of fellow priests are indicated and their wariness. In dramatic terms, one of the most moving sequences has an adult character remember his experiences with Fr Birmingham and then reveal to his fellow-victims that he had visited the priest as he was dying in hospital thirteen years earlier to find some kind of forgiveness for his hatred of him.

Many critics blame lawyers for inflating the cases for the sake of greater financial compensation. This theme is tackled well in the film. Ted Danson portrays Mitchell Garebandian, the lawyer who found himself in deeper waters than he anticipated and pursued Fr Geoghan. He is portrayed warts and all, his callow attitudes as well as his more personal involvement in the cases, his temptations to celebrity as well as his decent behaviour. The screenplay traces the steps he took to find evidence and documentation concerning the priests, letters written by complaining parishioners, a formal report from the 1980s commissioned by the church, which were not made available by Church authorities until a judge compelled them to. The decisions of *The Boston Globe* to pursue the issues and the people are also dramatized.

Christopher Plummer appears as Cardinal Law. He interprets the Cardinal in a complex way. He is a churchman of the old school who sees it as his duty to protect the church and

its reputation. He is a prelate who comes to realise that he has made grave mistakes in judgment—the scene where he speaks of his mistakes to Pope John Paul II has moving moments and takes us into the mind and heart of the Cardinal. The other sequences which repay viewing to try to understand how the Cardinal saw his role include a visit of one of the victims (who has been ignored and put off even when the Cardinal had said he would meet victims) confronts him in his residence and forces the Cardinal to listen and empathise as well as persuading him to attend a meeting of victims and families where he has a tough reception.

A sub-plot concerning a sometimes disgruntled priest, Fr Dominic Spagnolia (Brian Dennehy in a no-holds-barred performance) who speaks in his pulpit against Cardinal Law and demonstrates against him sometimes distracts from the main thrust of the film. Towards the end of the film, however, it becomes very serious as this priest has to face his own demons as well as allegations.

The end of 2015 will see a strong film, *Spotlight*, about the *Boston Globe's* pursuit of these issues and the clergy.

Probably the best film so far to understand the psyche of the abuser is Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (2004). He has adapted a novel by Scott Heim. The novel came out in 1995 when charges were beginning to surface more widely in various organisations, secular and religious. This film focuses on two families. The paedophile is the little league baseball coach. The setting is the late 1980s, early 1990s.

At this time, *Mysterious Skin*, proved helpful to many Christian audiences who found it difficult to understand how abuse could have happened within the church by showing abuse in a secular context, the world of the family and the sport's coach.

The film is strong in its portrayal of sexual abuse. However, Araki keeps a balance between being prurient and showing the dramatic and dire impact of sexual abuse. The film is visually reticent, the directness being

restricted to verbal frankness—which is often much easier to absorb than visual explicitness.

The film focuses on two very different boys. Neil (Joseph Gordon Levitt) is a young hustler. Brian (Brady Corbett) is an introverted young man who has no memory of being abused, no idea that he has been abused. He has so successfully created a psychological block that, when he sees a television program about UFOs, he begins to think that the missing hours of his life, that he has no way of accounting for, were caused by his being abducted by aliens. By the end of the film, when the two adolescents come together, they go to the house where the abuse happened and the hustler explains to the innocent boy what actually took place. This is a harrowing experience as the young man realises what has happened to him, the memories come back. This is the moment when the film ends, leaving the future for the two boys and a sense of wonder and anticipation as well as alarm for the audience.

The film is disturbing almost from its beginning. The initial focus is on Neil, speaking in voiceover and commenting on his attraction for the baseball coach and hinting at the implications of this. However, it is the pre-pubescent Neil who is speaking in this way. And this is already shocking in its way. However, Araki is suggesting that for some youngsters, their sexual focus emerges at a young age. This does not necessarily lead to abuse but that in this period, where so much attention has to be on victims, there may be some deep level response to the sexuality but not to elicit abuse. This is an area that has not received a great deal of attention. In this screenplay, it emerges that Neil has been complicit in the sexual behaviour. He has also been seduced into being an ally of the abuser in his activities with other boys. This compounds the evil compulsions of the perpetrator, the abuse of a child and the contamination of another child into being an abuser.

Neil talks about his orientation. He

indicates what happened during his visits to the coach's house. Much of this is visualised in the early part of the film—the more seductive aspects rather than sexual activity. While the audience tries to grapple with understanding the mentality of the young boy, the screenplay portrays the coach as a complex naïve but knowing seducer, who uses the language of games and seeming innocence, who is really an emotionally and morally immature boy. It is on this basis that the abusive sexual compulsions build up. Alarm and disgust at the paedophiles has obscured the need for trying to understand the mentality of the emotionally stunted abusers, their attractions and their exploitations.

Other films from this period which are also helpful in dramatising abuse, some within the family, include *The Butterfly Effect*, *Chromophobia*, and the documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* where, in a family who make it a practice of filming everything, two brothers are accused of abuse.

2006-2010

Background

With 2001-2005, as the main period when clerical sexual abuse issues were in the public media, and surfacing in many countries, especially the United States in 2002, this is a time when it was generally taken for granted that there had been many abusers and that they would have to be more investigations in dioceses and religious orders. There were crises moments, for example, prior to World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008, Cardinal Pell had to face some very public complaints, not very compassionately as reports later revealed. By contrast, Pope Benedict XVI in the United States and in Sydney, had meetings with the victims of abuse to listen to them and offer some church attentiveness to their experiences.

It is also at this time that the website,

Broken Rights, already established in Australia, began to include very detailed histories of particular cases and of particular perpetrators.

The films

In 2006, a major documentary about abuse in the United States was nominated for an Academy Award. It was called *Deliver us from Evil*. This is a meticulously made documentary by a director, Amy Berg, who is not a Christian and is looking at the issues from outside the Church. She sought advice and legal counsel about the truth of the claims made in the film.

The focus of the film is Fr Oliver O'Grady, an Irishman who worked in Northern California, from the 1960s to the 1980s. The film has significant ramifications for the Church today as, prior to his appointment to be archbishop of Los Angeles in 1985, Cardinal Roger Mahoney was auxiliary bishop in Fresno (1975-1980), bishop of Stockton (1980-1985).

Oliver O'Grady emerges from the film as, at least, self-delusional. On the one hand, he admits what he has done. On the other, he cheerfully excuses himself and compartmentalises his behaviour. As a portrait of a priest offending over decades, the film offers an alarming portrait. In September 2005, the BBC's *Panorama* program featured Oliver O'Grady. The film-maker, himself a victim of abuse in Ferns, Ireland, asked O' Grady to indicate how he 'groomed' a young girl for abuse. He cheerfully did so, straight to camera, an astonishing performance (and the BBC, to its discredit, featured this sequence in the promotion of the broadcast as well as including it at the head of the program as well as during it). Fr O'Grady's behaviour and comments as late as 2006 were bizarre and reprehensible.

Deliver us from Evil works dramatically and powerfully. The range of interviews with victims and their parents are placed throughout the film. They have been judiciously selected so that the audience

shares the experience of the families, the initial welcome to Fr O'Grady as he took a pastoral interest in them and became firm friends, being invited to meals and becoming part of the family. Families did not realise what was happening to their children. Such behaviour on the part of a priest was unthinkable to most.

As the truth emerged and Fr O'Grady went to different parishes in Northern California, the families were surprised, dismayed and shocked. Along with the chronicle of the history of Fr O'Grady's activities are the testimonies of Cardinal Mahoney and different church officials from Stockton diocese. Since the United States uses videocameras for depositions, the film incorporates footage of the actual questions and answers.

This is where there can be some controversy. The director has selected particular sections—and they sound to the detriment of the churchmen. The cross-examination reminds the audience that bishops were not so well informed about the nature of abuse, especially its criminality, and made decisions to move priests around—which resulted in further abuse. On the one hand, one can argue that in retrospect, bishops made poor decisions which resulted in some disastrous behaviour. On the other, we have more clarity now than then and it is easy to be judgmental in looking back. However, what is important is what has to be done now in terms of truth, justice and reparation.

One more alarming aspect of the film is the featuring of Fr Tom Doyle who, since the 1980s and his working in Washington DC and becoming involved in Bishops Conference decisions, has been something of a whistleblower and a friend of victims. He makes some very strong and critical statements during the film which also need examination and attention.

There were far fewer fictional films during this time.

The Least of These, 2008, seems to be set in a Catholic school and viewers have interpreted it that way. However, the school

and the chapel do not have any Catholic pictures, statues or iconic props and the final credits indicate that there was some strong Lutheran input into the making of the film. Be that as it may, it is still a relevant story, with violent implications which makes one realise that such vengeance against a priest abuser has not been the order of the day.

A young priest, Fr Andre (Isaiah Washington) who had been a student at the school, comes back to join the staff after being absent from the diocese (Colorado) for two years. His predecessor has disappeared. Andre is welcomed by the priest rector of the school, is treated warily by the disciplinarian and in a friendly way by the other priest on the staff. The boys are another matter, typical of boarders at any school, nominally religious but mainly not, while conforming to the rules of the school. Andre manages to settle in, dealing with the priests, trying to assess and relate to the boys, puzzling about the disappearance of Fr Collins. A rich boy, a sports champion is quite hostile, especially when Fr Andre, who teaches religion and has a great belief in prayer, asks the boys to compose their own and he parodies the Lord's Prayer. There is another reclusive boy who spends a lot of time in the chapel and is wary of talking.

We soon realise that he is one student who has been abused. Some of the boys search sealed off basement offices and it soon emerges that Fr Collins has been killed and the quiet boy is under suspicion. The media, needless to say, make a great deal out of the case, filming Fr Andre trying to put them off, then raising accusing suspicions about his behaviour. The audience shares in a number of discussions amongst the priests and how the situation should be handled.

The plot here has a few unexpected twists which makes the abuse by Fr Collins more harrowing, his murder comprehensible and the cover-up alarming. Fr Andre's life is also more complicated - he had been a whistleblower on a former case, with a close friend suspended

and hounded, only to discover that the whole affair had been fabricated by a child and parents. This sub-plot offers a sobering reminder of different scenarios in different cases.

Doubt, 2008, is a film of strong Catholic interest.

It can be viewed in the light of the Church experience of sexual abuse by clergy. However, this is not exactly the central issue of the film. *Doubt* is a film about Church structures, hierarchy, the exercise of power and the primacy of discipline and order.

Set in the autumn of 1964 in the Bronx, New York, the film focuses on the suspicions of the primary school principal, Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep), that the local priest and chaplain to the school, Fr Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is taking an unhealthy interest in one of the students, aged twelve. There are some suggestions, several ambiguous clues, about what might have happened but the actual events remain unclear as the priest defends himself against the nun's strong intuition against him. She discusses the problem with the boy's mother. As the title of the film indicates, the drama leaves the truth unclear because it is the stances of the two characters in conflict, especially the determined nun and the truth struggle, the power struggle, the conscience struggle, that is the point of the film.

John Patrick Shanley has adapted and opened out his Pulitzer-prize winning play for the screen and directed it himself. Shanley has indicated that he is not so much concerned with the issue of clerical abuse of children as of pitting two characters against each other to highlight the uncertainties of certainty and the nature of doubt. The drama is all the more powerful because of its naturalistic atmosphere, recreating the period and the life of the school, the convent and the rectory.

As with most organisations by the beginning of the 1960s, secular or religious, the Catholic Church was hierarchically structured. Everyone knew their place, whether

they liked it or not. A pervading Gospel spirit of charity and service pervaded the Church but it was often exercised in a way that seemed harsh and demanding, especially by those who saw their authority being backed by a 'grace of state'. Many of those who left the Church in this era have offered many anecdotes of the treatment they received from priests and nuns as reasons for their departure, even of their loss of faith.

Sister Aloysius is a strong-minded superior of the strict, intervening school of religious life. She sees herself as an authority figure and what she says goes. This was the spirituality of God's will spoken through the Superior—though, in retrospect, this often seems more the whim of the superior. She believes in discipline and she does not expect to be liked. She trusts her intuitions and assumes that they are correct. But, the kind of Church and religious life she has inherited mean that she is constantly on the alert, wants proper order everywhere and sees herself in the chain of hierarchical authority that goes. To this extent, the portrait of Sister Aloysius helps us understand authoritarian stances taken by many bishops in the abuse cases.

At the opening of the film, Fr Flynn gives a sermon on experiencing doubts. This cuts no ice with Sister Aloysius. Fr Flynn is already on her hit list because of his friendliness towards the children in the school. He coaches basketball. He talks with the children and affirms them. This kind of pastoral outreach was about to be encouraged by the Vatican Council's document on priesthood.

The confrontations between Sister Aloysius and Fr Flynn becomes quite desperate for Fr Flynn when he realises that the nun is so certain and dominating and has taken investigations into her own hands rather than respecting him as a person let alone a priest. We see the conflict between the old authoritarian style and the new, more personable style of interactions. While Shanley himself states that he has some sympathy for the old ways, rituals, silence and

devotion, his drama clearly shows the inadequacy of the authoritarian hierarchical model of Church in dealing with human relationships.

Doubt offers an opportunity to look at the two models of Church and to assess their strengths and weaknesses, especially in the light of subsequent events and the nature and life of the Church at the present day.

Shanley's images of Sister Aloysius at the end indicates that he believes we should all have doubts and not take the moral high ground of untested certainties.

A film well worth seeing, secular and concerning families and a teenage daughter, is *Trust*, 2010, to be seen especially by adults, and parents with their teenage children. It is a strongly cautionary story about the Internet, Internet communication and lies. In this case, the 15 year old daughter of a couple makes contact with someone who says that he is a student, gradually reveals that he is older, and makes an appointment to meet her which she eagerly goes to. He flatters her, buys her special underwear, and then takes her to a room and assaults her. Eventually, the criminal is unmasked, a quiet man who lives with his family but who has preyed on other girls.

The value of seeing the film in this context is that it dramatises how grooming works, especially online, in chatrooms.

2011-2015

Background

The number of films dealing with clerical sexual abuse was comparatively small during this period, although it was at this time that some governments became involved, a nine-year enquiry and report into the church in Ireland, state commissions of investigation in Australia, leading to the establishment of a Rule Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse in non-governmental institutions, and the many hearings, some in

private, some public, where victims of abuse were able to tell their stories and some perpetrators and some authorities cross-examined in great detail.

The Films

Once again, this is a period of documentaries, one in particular, really being required viewing: *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God*, (2012).

It needs to be said that this is a very well-made film. Audiences will not agree with all the speakers or the expert 'talking heads'. After all, the film marshals facts but, as is any film, it is an interpretation. The writer-director, Alex Gibney, has very good credentials, winning an Oscar for Best documentary for another investigation, this time torture in Afghanistan and Iraq, *Taxi to the Darkside*. Expose is his forte.

As with any successful film, the maker wants to draw the audience in. And that is what happens here. We are informed briefly about the woeful abuse career of Milwaukee priest, Lawrence Murphy. He is the offender for the first third of the film. But, the film is victim-focused, all the more emotionally telling here because we see men in their fifties and watch them tell their stories—'watch' advisedly because the men are deaf and sign their stories, vividly and powerfully, while some articulate Hollywood actors speak their signed words.

Fr Lawrence Murphy, ordained in 1950, was a popular figure, fund raiser for the school for the deaf which he eventually ran for many years.

The stories of the men are told plainly, factually, especially of their childhood and family backgrounds. Some parents could not sign which put the boys at a great disadvantage in letting their parents know about the molestation. The stories are also told visually with many excerpts from home movies of the period, of the boys and their life at the school and of Fr Murphy himself. Which means greater repugnance from the audience.

The complaints and testimony are clear, detailed and, though some at the time could not believe the boys or such stories about a priest, undeniable. We hear their response to persistent abuse, some feelings of being singled out and special, their shock at experiences in confession and in Fr Murphy's room and holiday house. And their resigning themselves to this fate. Evidence is shown that official complaints about Fr Murphy were made to the Apostolic Delegate in 1974.

That first section of the film was called *'Lambs of God'*. The next section introduces the veteran of studies of clerical celibacy, with interviews of priests over the decades, Richard Sipe. A former Benedictine, Sipe has written extensively. His introduction at this stage of the film enables him to offer something of the history of celibacy, deficiencies in formation of priests, the consequences of this as well as the loneliness in the celibate vocation. The selection of sequences with Sipe are judiciously chosen and make a great deal of sense (while not saying everything, as many would point out). Other experts seen in the film include another former Benedictine, Patrick, who had a mission of moving around examining cases but who ultimately found it, and his perceptions of covering priests, too much and so left the priesthood.

The passionate Fr Doyle, the American priest who has been constant in his work (and now, perhaps, feeling justified in his perseverance of cases and issues, especially in the context of law and Canon Law) has a great deal to say about cases, about the loyal impulses of priests, bishops and devout laity who have felt that they must protect the church at all costs.

There are some interesting sub-plots, so to speak, which enhance the quality of the film and its research. The story of Fr Gerald Fitzgerald and his founding of the Servants of the Paracletes in the 1940s, an order to work with priest sexual offenders as well as priest alcoholics. He advocated spiritual reform rather than psychology, but he and his order are

praised for recognizing and acknowledging the problems and wanting the priests out of and away from ministry.

The other sub-plot concerns the career of money-raiser, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, confidante of Cardinals and Popes, who was a Jeekyll and Hyde perpetrator of sex crimes and injustices, Fr Maciel. His story, well-illustrated in terms of clerical patronage, is told in the context of John Paul II (who favoured him) and Benedict XVI (who ultimately dismissed him to a life of prayer and penance, though beachfront footage of Jacksonville, Florida, is shown as his final home).

From Wisconsin, the second third of the film moves to Boston and the 2002 uncovering of scandals, the arrests and gaoling of Frs Geoghan and Shanley, the resignation of Cardinal Law (with adverse comments on his leadership on the issue in Boston) and his comfortable career and life in Rome.

We all need to be media savvy, knowing what we want to say and saying it, without ambiguity or leaving ourselves open to misinterpretation or ridicule. There is a terrible moment in an interview with Cardinal Desmond Connell of Dublin (who is later shown as having made some effort, though belatedly, in contacting Rome about cases). He is asked if it would have been good to have visited victims. He does admit it would, but, unfortunately, for himself and his reputation, he adds, even with traces of a smile, that he does have many things to do.

At different stages during the film, opinions are given as well as questions raised as to how anyone could commit such crimes. Some technical language is used, quite enlightening and suggesting further reflection. 'Noble cause corruption' is one contribution, the perpetrator's belief in his own good. There are later quotations from Fr Murphy stating that he was trying to help the boys, some with sexual orientation difficulties, that he behaved as he did to help some boys through sexual confusion, that he recognised their needs, even taking their sins on himself—and that he

prayed and confessed afterwards. There was also mention of 'cognitive distortion' in the way that the abuser interpreted his behaviour.

The only other member of the clergy to be interviewed for the film besides Fr Doyle is Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee, who talks frankly and with sorrow and shame about events in his own life (nothing to do with abuse of minors) who, when asked had he met Fr Murphy, replied that the main impression he made was that he was childlike in his self-delusions.

But, in the latter third of the film, the focus is well and truly on Rome. One of the difficulties is the constant referring to 'The Vatican'. While the references to the Pope and the Curia are accurate in their way, it is particular people in the Vatican and its bureaucracy who are responsible. The whole section will be fascinating to many Catholics but may be too general or taking audiences into unfamiliar realms which may make it rather difficult for some non-Catholic audiences. Here is where the investigative journalism can be hard work. The film tries to give some dates for letters coming to the Office of Doctrine of the Faith, of Cardinal Ratzinger's decisions that all cases come to him which, as the narrator suggests, makes him the most informed person in the world on this abuse. Dates are given as are examples of letters sent and not answered, or material back to sender as unwanted.

At the end we go back to Milwaukee. We see the men signing again, 'Deaf Power!'. We see their desperation, their being acknowledged (after some scenes with Archbishop Cousins of Milwaukee in the 1970s whose response was erratic, inclined not to believe such stories about a priest, meeting with Fr Murphy rather than asking any of the other students and sending a nun (name and photo supplied in the film) to get one of the men to recant his statement and make an apology to the archdiocese). One writes a letter to Cardinal Sodano, telling the story, asking for Fr Murphy to be stood down, noting that he is still allowed to receive communion when

others who are far less guilty are forbidden. Two of them went to see Fr Murphy before he died in 1998, with a camera, but he told them to go away, that he was an old man and wanted to live in dignity. He seems to have gone out, nevertheless, to play poker machines and collapsed, and was buried in vestments as a priest. But, the men are alive, relieved and, still in the spirit of activism, American style, protesting.

So, in 2012-2013, a film that summarises much of the history of abuse and how it was handled and mishandled or not handled.

More documentaries on abuse in secular institutions are emerging from the United States, one, *The Overnighters* (2014), showing workers being brought in to a plant and local subjecting that some of them have accusations of abuse against them. Another focuses on a community where it seems that some Lutheran pastors had been abusers. *Happy Valley* (2014) is a documentary about a sports coach arrested for abuse. And Kirby Dick who made the 2004 documentary on the Catholic Church and abuse, *Twist of Faith*, has made two more documentaries, *The Invisible War* (2012) where he turns his attention to abuse in the military and *The Hunting Ground* (2015) on abuse, cover-ups on American college campuses.

In terms of fiction, for this period, the outstanding drama is an Australian six-part television mini-series, *Devils Playground*. It takes a character from the 1976 film, *The Devils Playground*, a student in the Marist Bros Juniorate, in 1953, and asks what his character might be doing in 1988. He is a psychologist becomes involved at the invitation of an auxiliary Bishop of Sydney, in taking on a priest accused of abusing boys as a client.

This miniseries shows a wide range of clerical characters and how they were handling abuse accusations in 1988, in the archdiocese: the role of the Cardinal, the stances of his two auxiliary bishops, a head of an Institute where abusive priests went for therapy, a range of parish priests as well as teaching brothers, and the accused priest himself, formerly a parish

priest and now a school chaplain. The series opens with the suicide of a young boy, the investigations, the effect on a family when the truth is revealed, a focus on another little boy who is being groomed, picked out as someone special, taken on camps, taken hunting with a gun, but who is confused when the priest he admires keeps turning up at his home.

With six hours running time, the series has the opportunity to go to some length and depth in exploring characters. The abusing priest himself has charming moments, seems to be a very concerned priest, but is in denial about what he has been doing, even while discussing with the psychologist, and the situation is generally treated as hush-hush. In a twist of plot, it is the seemingly liberal auxiliary Bishop who finishes with covering up, even protecting himself from exposure in his handling the situation. It is the seemingly conservative bishop whose conscience is struck, who is asked to be secretive by the Papal Nuncio even as he asks his own secretary to find out the facts, but agrees to meet the families to discuss the matter, even when he finds it repugnant and is awkward in his manner.

The brother principal of the school which the victims attend is initially wary but ultimately does confront the priest and another brother, and the audience initially suspect him of being an abuser, is in fact by no means an abuser but the support of the abused boys.

It is interesting that a country of small population, like Australia, which has had to face so many cases, is able to produce a miniseries which is technically and dramatically excellent and probing.

This survey will end for a film which has received acclaim and has been widely seen: *Calvary* (2014),

As can be seen from the title, this is a film rooted in the gospel story and in Catholic faith. It is one of the best films on priests in recent years. It was written and directed by John Michael McDonagh, whose screenplay reveals quite detailed knowledge of the church

in Ireland and which brings the plot to contemporary life - even though, one hopes, that the principal events of the film would not happen in real life. Brendan Gleeson gives a totally persuasive performance as a parish priest in Ireland, 38 km from Sligo.

With the focus of the title, it is clear that this will be a film about suffering, or that the priest will be a significant Christ-figure, a victim of his own Calvary, an innocent victim, atoning for the sins of others.

This is made very clear from the opening sequence, the priest sitting in the confessional, a man coming into the box and declaring that he has been a victim of a priest's sexual abuse, that it happened over many years, that it has ruined his life. And then he makes a threat that he will kill this priest on the following Sunday, not because he is a guilty man, but because he is innocent and that will make his death more significant.

Since the initial theme is that of clerical sexual abuse, Calvary has to be seen in the context of the Church in Ireland, of the government enquiry, of sentences for guilty clergy, and the criticism of church officials for not understanding the crisis and for not acting on it well. This gives a powerful framework for this week in the life of the parish priest, considering what he has been told, preparing for his possible death. The accuser could be anyone in the village, although the priest has recognised his voice. He is a late vocation, a widower who decided on priesthood after his wife's death. We are introduced to his daughter, who has attempted suicide, but has come to visit her father and talk things over with him. Which means he is a priest of some life experience, of family life, even though he reflects that he was something of a failure - and a drinker.

The action of the film is basically the priest visiting different people in the parish, a woman who does his washing, is separated from her husband, the local butcher, and is having an affair with the local garage man. She is not averse to other relationships, especially to the

atheist and mocking doctor in the local hospital. But, as with the other characters, she is able to speak frankly to the priest and he is able to speak frankly with her. It is the same with her husband, the butcher. There is a young man in the village, rather prim and proper, awkward in his manner, who comes to the priest to discuss his ambitions, his personality, his sexual problems, his future. Other people he visits include the man from the garage, the local policeman and his rather exhibitionist son, a local landowner who is alienated from his family, drinks a great deal, and confesses that he cares for nothing and no one. On the lighter side, there is an old American author who welcomes the priest, getting food from him,

NOTE:

An overview of this topic appeared in *Compass*, 2005.

For readers wanting more detail about particular films, the information readily available on The Internet Movie Database is recommended.

For discussion material on these films, Google Peter Malone's website.

Often, there is detailed information about particular films and their history found by Googling Wikipedia.

but wanting a gun just in case he gets ill and needs to leave this world.

It is the priest's preparation and readiness which is more important than what might happen, his death or not. However, one significant question for the priest is whether he wept at the killing of his pet dog—and whether he wept at the plight of the victims of sex abuse. A key question for the church, hierarchy and laity.

John Michael McDonagh does have a key idea, revealed early in the film, when his daughter asks the priest about virtues. He replies that forgiveness has been underrated—something which pervades the ending of the film.

Sexual abuse of minors is not the province of the Catholic Church alone. About 4 percent of priests committed an act of sexual abuse on a minor between 1950 and 2002, according to a study being conducted by John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. That is roughly consistent with data on many similar professions....

"We don't see the Catholic Church as a hotbed of this or a place that has a bigger problem than anyone else," Ernie Allen, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, told Newsweek. "I can tell you without hesitation that we have seen cases in many religious settings, from traveling evangelists to mainstream ministers to rabbis and others."

Part of the issue is that the Catholic Church is so tightly organized and keeps such meticulous records -- many of which have come to light voluntarily or through court orders -- that it can yield a fairly reliable portrait of its personnel and abuse over the decades. Other institutions, and most other religions, are more decentralized and harder to analyze or prosecute. Still, it is hardly good news that the church appears to be no different from most other institutions in its incidence of abuse. Shouldn't the Catholic Church and other religious institutions hold to a higher standard?

—'Five myths about the Catholic sexual abuse scandal' by David Gibson, Washington Post, Sunday, April 18, 2010