

ANGLOPHONE CONFERENCE 2014

Introductory address by **Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin**

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"The Anglophone Conference is a unique gathering. It is unique in the first place in that it does not have a website, almost a mortal sin of omission by today's Conference standards! The Anglophone Conference is an informal gathering, by its nature unstructured or at least under-structured. And indeed that may well be its advantage.

The origins of the Anglophone Conference lie in an interest which arose among bishops from a number of English-speaking countries to come together informally to share experiences about how to address the problem of the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious. It was an attempt to take a more coherent look at a phenomenon which, because it was an unspeakably dark part of the life of the Church, inevitably gave rise to the temptation that it be kept out of the limelight. The result was often that the challenge of abuse was not addressed or was addressed in different ways in different parts of the world. In the Anglophone Conference, Bishops came together to begin to trace a different path.

The Anglophone Conference may well have been from the start under-structured, but in time it became a real workshop of best practice, in which Episcopal Conferences could come together and explore what were the best ways of breaking taboos about the subject of child abuse by clergy and of developing solid norms of pastoral practice which could be addressed by Bishops' Conferences in different cultural and juridical situations.

The Anglophone Conference was pioneering and trend-setting. In these days we have come together to hear success stories of progress that has been made worldwide. We are pleased to hear from those working in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith about the standards of good practice that are now rightly being demanded throughout the entire Church.

But it is important to remember that the Anglophone Conference was a pioneer in looking for coherent international norms and in anticipating much that has now become commonplace, at times facing negative reactions even within the Holy See. Today we have moved beyond any climate of suspicion to one of cooperation and we thank God for the progress that has been made on all sides. We also thank God for our ability to recognise that the road that we all still have to travel is long. The greatest harm that we could do to the progress that has been made right across the Church is to slip back into a false assurance that the crisis is a thing of the past.

The Anglophone Conference is a unique event. It is not a conference of canonists or survivors, of psychologists or criminologists; it is not a simply gathering of bishops. It is a forum for creative pastoral reflection, it is a gathering in which a wide ranging group of men and women from different backgrounds and countries try

to draw conclusions regarding our responsibilities in addressing what has been a major crisis and stumbling block for the Catholic Church.

The crisis of the sexual abuse of children in the Church is not a chapter of the past history of the Church. Abuse can and does still take place. Abuse will remain a wound in the side of the Church until the day on which every single survivor of abuse has achieved the personal healing he or she deserves.

My starting point in any personal reflection on the scandal of sexual abuse is always that what happened *should never have happened in the Church of Jesus Christ*. We can argue that the sexual abuse of children takes place right across society and that it is unfair to single out the Catholic Church. We can regurgitate statistics which will tell us that the incidence of such abuse is not significantly higher within the Catholic clergy than in society. But if we come back and repeat to ourselves that what happened *should never have happened in the Church of Jesus Christ* then we have to put all the comforting statistics to one side and begin to think in a different light.

The sexual abuse of children on the scale in which it happened should never have occurred in the Catholic Church because Jesus himself tells us that children are a sign of the kingdom of God. This means that our understanding of faith and of the kingdom is somehow measured in the manner in which we protect and respect and cherish children or in which we fail children. We know well the strong words of Jesus about those who would injure or harm children.

We need to develop a new awareness that what has happened has wounded the entire Church and that now the entire Church is called to put right what has happened. The entire Church is called to put itself right in its relations with the kingdom and with Jesus Christ. Healing is not just a question for the counsellors; it is a theological and ecclesiological necessity.

The only Church response must be one which attempts to bring healing to a wounded Church through robustly responding to all those who have been wounded by abuse. The healing of the Church comes through how the Church works to heal survivors.

The Church must not just be transformed into a place where children are safe. It must also be transformed into a privileged place of healing for survivors. It must be transformed into a place where survivors, with all their reticence and with all their repeated anger towards the Church, can genuinely come to feel that the Church is a place where they will encounter healing. We are not that kind of Church yet: and by far.

The Church which talks about a preferential option for the poor must show unflinchingly a preferential option for those who have been victims of abuse within its fold. There are still within the Church some who play down the realities of abuse, or who take short cuts with regard to established norms and guidelines. In doing so, they damage the Church's witness to the healing power of Jesus Christ. There is nothing more hurtful to survivors than to find the Church proclaiming norms and then to find that they are not being followed. I was struck to read in some of the National Reports for this Conference that there are still dioceses or Religious Congregations which opt out of National norms.

The Church can and should ensure adequate counselling for victims and their families. But it must do more. Healing cannot be delegated. The Church must become the bosom of Christ which lovingly embraces wounded men and women, with all the brutality and unattractiveness of wounds. Wounds cannot be sanitised from a distance. The Good Samaritan is the one who carries the wounded man in his own arms.

Bishops and superiors have to ensure that survivors are made feel truly welcome when they turn to Church authorities. One survivor told me that while she was received by her local priest correctly, in the sense that all the boxes of the norms were correctly ticked, she still had the enduring impression that the priest would have much preferred that she had not come to him and that she we would go away as quickly as possible and that the counsellors would take over.

The words of Jesus about leaving the ninety-nine to go out to find the one who is lost, refers also to our attitude to victims. To some it might seem less than prudent to think that the Church would go out of its way to seek out even more victims and survivors. There are those who say that that would only create more anguish and litigation and that it would be asking for trouble and would be more than a little ingenuous. The problem is that what Jesus says about leaving the ninety and going out after the one who is lost is in itself unreasonable and imprudent, but, like it or not, that it precisely what Jesus asks us to do.

Jesus teaches us through parables that are all marked by exaggeration. They are all about something that we can never figure out within our own human categories: the gratuitousness and superabundance of God's love which always requires us to go the extra mile beyond what is humanly considered as prudent or appropriate or even the best. It is however when we reflect that superabundant love of God in the way we live in the Church that we also see fruits produced which go beyond human expectation. Remember those twelve baskets of food which remain after Jesus had undertaken the humanly unreasonable task of feeding a large crowd with meagre means. Jesus' generosity goes way beyond human prudence.

We have to reach out to all those who are involved in abuse. We have a responsibility towards perpetrators to bring them to a realisation of what they have done and to make reparation through living a different life. Jesus is the one who shows mercy, but not cheap forgiveness. Careful monitoring and support of perpetrators is a contribution to creating a safe environment for children within the Church as well as helping perpetrators to lead more healthy lives.

Our care must also reach out to the many who may seem only to have been marginally touched by abuse. I think of parish communities. I spent an evening only last week with a small parish community whose priest had recently been imprisoned for serious abuse. It was a community whose trust in themselves and in the Church had been deeply wounded.

Our care must reach out in a special way to our young people who are hyper-sensitive to any contrast between what the Church preaches and what is done within its walls. Many young people have been wounded in their ability to come to know Jesus because of their disgust at what has happened to children in the Church.

The answers to all these multiple wounds will not come from slick public relations gestures or even from repeated words of apology. They will come from creating a

new vision of a healing Church. A healing Church will not be from the outset a perfect Church. The Church must first of all recognise within her own life how compromise and insensitivity and wrong decisions have damaged the witness of Church. The art of healing is learned only in humility. Arrogance is never the road towards healing. Healing is not something we can package and hand over safe and sound to someone else and then we can go off safely and happily on our own way. Healing involves journeying together. The healer needs humility and personal healing if he or she is to journey really with those who are wounded. The duration of the process of healing is not measured by the time on our watch, but by the watch and the time of the other.

The crisis of the sexual abuse of children over these past decades has wounded the Church of Jesus Christ. The response must come from the entire Church which will only attain the healing it desires when it welcomes our brothers and sisters who have survived abuse as Jesus would have welcomed them. We are not there to tell the survivors what they have to do, but together to find new ways of interacting with respect and care. I can say that I have never gone away from a conversation with a survivor of child sexual abuse without having learned something new, even if our encounter may have been marked by anger and aggression towards the Church. My ministry has greatly benefited from what I have learned – and at times learned in a hard way – from survivors. That is why I ask not just their forgiveness for what happened to them, but I am grateful to them for what they have done for me" . ENDS