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A Unique Betrayal: Childhood Sexual Abuse by Roman Catholic Priests

- In the politics of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, individuals and their lives can get lost or used
- Casting survivors and perpetrators in homogenized groups with unchangeable identities serves to reinforce gross misconceptions of survivors as damaged for life and perpetrators as embodied and immutable evil
- Simplistic narratives reinforce reductionistic thinking which further marginalize individuals and frustrate our best efforts towards healing, prevention and restoration
- The sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests is a multilayered and complicated issue with many unknowns and too few simple and straightforward explanations
- We need to guard against an unhelpful binary which permeates the social discourse of child sexual abuse - them and us; good and bad; knowing and not knowing; sin and purification; heroes and villains; scandal and self-preservation; sacred and profane
- As a community of believers, we are called to hold, carry and transform tension so as to not give it back in kind
- Obstacles to moving forward: abuse fatigue; dialectics of blame; image management; and a misguided theology of scandal
- Child sexual abuse global prevalence: 18% of girls and 8% of boys (> 18 years old)
- After sexual abuse by a Catholic priest, many victims experience something they never experienced before; the empty feeling that the spiritual bond with God is worthless because the earthly signs of it are all wrapped up in betrayal
- Relational child sexual abuse involves the desecration of the soul. The child's ongoing sense of identity is fragmented, and their capacity for spiritual experience, for imagination, creativity, relatedness are deeply wounded.
- Theological conflict: loss of spiritual identity; existential angst; and re-traumatization through encounters with institutionalized Church authorities and representatives
- Healing and restoration: 'sunlight is the best disinfectant'
- Significant numbers of survivors report that many counseling situations fail to respond to

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the spiritual trauma

- Re-imagining ones understanding of God: anger at God and the Church validated as healthy response to the abuse; discovery and acceptance of a life-giving spirituality and faith based upon a healthy sense of self-worth and an experience of feeling unconditionally loved by a benevolent God
- Forgiveness cannot be demanded!
- When I say sorry I am in charge. When I ask for forgiveness, I am no longer in charge, I am in the hands of others.
- Within the social sciences, forgiveness is understood to occur when a survivor sheds the emotional control the abuser held even years after the tragic event and moves beyond the point where the sexual assault dominates feelings and emotions, continuously disturbing the ability to love and be at peace. Forgiveness is happening when the survivor creatively redirects his or her anger rather than being devoured and obsessed by it. At this point, the abuser and the enabling Church system has lost control over the victim.
- Within the Christian tradition, theologians and scripture scholars need to collaborate more closely with survivors to open up deeper understandings of the process of Christian forgiveness for those who have experienced the trauma of childhood sexual abuse by Catholic priests
- Truth recovery begins when I choose personal vulnerability over group defensiveness and risk internal transformation over institutional stability
- We need to learn from past mistakes of not listening to victim-survivors and being manipulated by offenders
- The first step towards healing is to listen carefully to victims and believe their painful stories
- The experience of being believed at the time of disclosure is the single best predictor of resilience and future recovery
- We need to reclaim relational inclusiveness
- Deep inclusive listening: narrative truth telling; restoration of right relationships; commence the long work of mourning; and truth recovery and reclaiming justice

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- Saint Augustine of Hippo: Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain as they are.
- Reform without amnesia
- The change that has taken place in Irish culture requires radical change in the life of the Church of such an extent that in the face of it, even experts in change management would feel daunted. Change is inevitably painful. Radical change can be too radical for some to real face it. In the face of such daunting change, the reaction can tempt us to stick to keeping the show on the road. We know its rules. It worked in the past. At least it's something I'm good at.
- A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but in how it treats those seen as its lowest

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