



THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR
SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN
IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

Briefing Paper

**Briefing Paper on the Independent
Commission for the Study of Child Sexual
Abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church**

February 2023





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About the Briefing Papers

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (National Board) was established to provide advice, services and assistance in furtherance of the development of the safeguarding of children within the Roman Catholic Church on the island of Ireland. The National Board also monitors compliance with legislation, policy and best practice and reports on these activities annually, as comprehensively set out in the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company, Coimirce.

Article 4 (iii) of the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company requires the National Board to: “ report and provide, upon request from the Constituents or any Constituent, support, advisory and training services to such Constituents or Constituent on policies and practices relating to safeguarding of children.”

The National Board already provides comprehensive Guidance to support the implementation of *Safeguarding Children, Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016*. In addition annually we produced Guidance, Advice and Practice (GAP) papers further complements the detailed Guidance on topics of current interest to constituents.

This development of Briefing Papers is envisaged to provide information contained in detailed research papers, journal articles, and inquiry reports relevant to safeguarding that we condense into a short digest format for ease of reference.

The Briefing Papers are the National Board's critique and assessments of key points and lessons that can be learned from externally written reports.

The views expressed are those of the National Board and should not be considered as a definitive position on the given topic.

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1. Background

In 2021 the President of the Portuguese Episcopal Conference established the Independent Commission for the Study of Child Sexual Abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church. The Commission team consisted of a gender-balanced multidisciplinary team to include recognised professionals in law, sociology, psychology, social work, journalism and history.

2. Remit of Inquiry

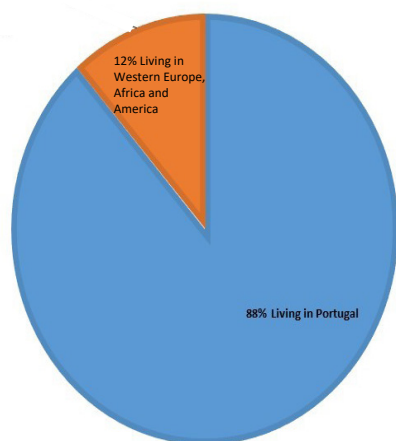
The Commission's work was defined as the study of child sexual abuse by members of the Church and/or those who worked with it, between 1950 and 2022, with a view to obtaining a better understanding of the past and of what action is best suited to action and preventing abuse in the future.

The Remit sought to put the abuse victim at the centre of its work, encouraging victims to give evidence, therefore giving them a voice. The work was not an institutional analysis, nor did the study consider the life experience and trajectories of the abusers.

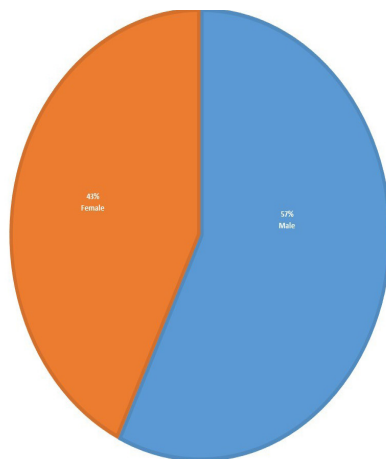
3. Participant Information

Victims were invited to provide their testimonies and relay their stories through an open ended survey as well as in person interviews. Diocesan Bishops and Religious Leaders were also interviewed. Material analysed as part of the inquiry included archival material, content of newspaper articles and statistical data.

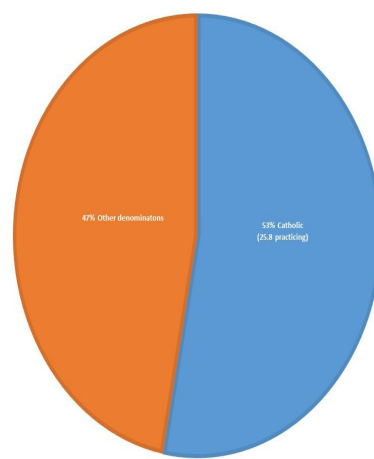
Below is a breakdown of some information of the participants.



LOCATION



GENDER



RELIGION

Other facts related to the sample of participants:

- 40.9% were married, and 60% have children (an average of 1.99 per couple).
- 32.4% of respondents have a university degree, 12.9% of them have Master's degrees.
- The main occupations represented were "specialists in intellectual and scientific fields."

4. Findings

A. Information received from Victims

Profile of Children:

At the time they were first abused, 58.6% of the child victims were living with their parents, the vast majority of them in 'couple with children' family units (54.9%). Approximately 1 in 5 victims were living in institutions and 7.8% were living in single parent families.

The majority of these children were abused between the ages of 10 and 14, the average age being 11.2. There is a difference here between girls and boys: 11.7 years as opposed to 10.5 years. Most victims were studying (88.1%), and attending the first and second cycles of the education system (58.5% of cases).

The largest number of instances of sexual abuse in time took place between the beginnings of the 1960s up to 1990, a period which accounts for 58.3% of testimonies. The period from 1991 to the present day accounts for 21.9% of cases. Over the years there was an increase in the age at which abuse first took place.

The Inquiry estimated that the 512 victims knew of or were in contact with close to 4,300 other victims.

Types of abuse:

The main types of sexual abuse discussed by the participants includes manipulation of the sexual organs, masturbation, oral and anal sex as well as full copulation. However, the type of abuse varied according to gender. The main types of abuse among boys were reported as anal sex, manipulation of the sexual organs and masturbation. Amongst girls the abuse relates to and verbal innuendo.

Over the years there was an increase in types of abuse involving masturbation, anal and oral sex, and viewing of child pornography.

Where the abuse happened:

Seminaries (23% of cases), church otherwise unspecified (18.8%), confessional (14.3%), rectory (12.9%) and religious school (6.9%).

Frequency:

57.2% of the testimonies mention that abuse took place on more than one occasion.

"For more than a year" was the duration mentioned by 27.5% of respondents, the types of abuse many and ongoing.

Participants reported that the abuse stopped when "the victim went away" from the place and/or person in question (31.6%), and as a result of the victim's greater "capacity for physical and psychological self-defence" in 31.4% of cases.

Who abused:

77% of cases involve "the Priest", and in 46.7% of cases the perpetrator was already known to the victim. It was noted that:

- Younger abusers more often resorted to penetration in secluded spaces or hideaways.
- Middle-aged abusers were prone to a greater variety of types and locations of abuse.
- Much older abusers resorted to forms of abuse in the confessional which did not involve bodily contact.

Disclosure:

The abuse was mainly revealed in a family setting (51.7%). Males tended to tell their spouses and friends, females their parents, and mothers in particular. For 54% of cases, it was only as adults (over 18 years of age) that they told of their experiences, but this was reported as earlier in amongst female participants.

Response:

In 65.8% of cases, nothing was done to remove the abuser, 77% of the victims never made a complaint to Church personnel or organisations, and only 4.3% took their cases to court.

How the Abuser operated:

The following bullet points relate to how the abuser gained access and groomed or manipulated their victims. The abuser:

- Offered to help and support victims and/or their close family.
- Manipulated victim's perception of their various weaknesses – emotional, educational, family, financial and spiritual/religious – as the starting point for the abuse.
- Suggested the child needed “purification”.
- Groomed through leisure and holiday activities.
- Claimed they had a ‘divine purpose’ which consequently needed to be fulfilled. With abusers being seen as having a certain symbolic profile.
- Was seen as having a social and cultural importance.
- Dominated the child take, using imperatives, such as unquestionable orders and rules
- Tried to downplay the pathological and criminal aspects of the act itself, normalizing it to the child, attributing a false meaning to it or denying that it has occurred, projecting the alleged reasons for it onto others, including the person or the will of God.
- Imputed the abuse to the child, stating the child wanted the sexual act and that they would value it into the future.
- Claimed they were engaged in “scientific” teachings related to the human body (e.g. how the sexual organs work).
- After the abuse had occurred expressly asked or ordered the victims to “keep it secret”, abusers commonly resorting to various forms of blackmail, often by threatening to reveal the child's behaviour to family members or friends.
- Showed contempt and humiliated the child, making the child feel vulnerable in relationship with adults; in many situations there was an increase victims' feelings of loneliness and abandonment.

Impact of abuse on victims:

Participants involved in the inquiry reported the following impacts from the abuse they suffered, The impacts presented in many ways, with strong and long lasting symptoms:

- Some had physical injuries in certain parts of the body, where there was penetration through anal sex or copulation, but most of these were never revealed by the victims.
- The victims had feelings of fear, guilt, shame, disgust, humiliation, confusion, distrust, insecurity, indignation and loneliness.
- Anguish and panic, phobias, some had obsessive-compulsive disturbances and fluctuations in temper, with depression and its consequences (for example, stomach upsets, poor sleep, episodes of self-harm and attempts at suicide (7 ended in effective suicide).
- Impact on their sex life: the abuse led them to question their sexual orientation, delayed or hindered the development of a sex life with partners and even made it impossible for them to build lasting or gratifying emotional relationships.
- Some needed to seek specialized support, in psychological or psychiatric consultations, with a recurrent need to use pharmaceutical drugs.

The abuse was rarely disclosed at an early age, so victims were dragged through decades of silence, with the negative prospect that the suffering will continue into the future.

Child victims described themselves as persons who in their family and social contexts were religious and practising. For these reasons, and with the abuse being perpetrated by members of the Church, they later developed a “basic mistrust” which persists to this day and in many cases led them to want to protect subsequent generations of their children and/or

Grandchildren. Many cut contact with the Church and partly or entirely ceased to be practising, although they remain Catholic and express their faith by other means.

The study shows that the Church lost faithfulness groups as a direct result of child sexual abuse perpetrated by its members.

Suggestions by Victims:

The following are suggestions by victims of what the Church needs to do to learn from past mistakes.

- For the Catholic Church to be aware of, understand and respect the sexuality of the clergy
- Remove compulsory celibacy, and give respect for freedom of sexual orientation and/or an active sex life.
- Training and supervision of Church members, by accredited professionals from outside the Church.
- Integration and participation of women in religious practice and hierarchy.
- The removal of certain forms of contact with believers such as confessions in physically confined spaces.
- Harsher punishment for aggressors, including compulsory chemical or physical castration
- Changes to strengthen legislation, which the victims believe to be not only necessary but appropriate. Suggestions included changes to the legal framework, longer sentences and extending the statute of limitations for these crimes.
- Faster action by the courts, either under canon or criminal law. A significant body of opinion among responders criticised the length of time it took to get justice from the courts, providing a sense that abusers go unpunished or are protected by the Church and by the State itself.
- Victims stated that there can be no reparation – but there is a need for psychological and psychiatric help currently and in the future.
- The highest percentage of responses mentioned the need for a public apology by the Portuguese Catholic Church to the victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by its members.
- Need a commitment to appropriate future solutions to prevent and act upon abuse.

B. Interviews with Bishops and Religious Leaders

Bishops and Religious Leaders did not at any level, connect with the volume, intensity and seriousness of abuse shared by the victims, it was just not in their thinking. This is perhaps linked to the fact that there was no training in the seminary on abuse or addressing the experience of sexuality in general (their own and that of others) or to recognise that before they became priests, bishops, or other religious person these were all persons, men and women, with their own life experience. Most denied having had direct experience of the issue, whether during their training or once they were engaged in pastoral activities, responding defensively, leading to effective total paralysis of any ability to acknowledge the problem and deal with it in an appropriate way.

Some belittled the significance of sexual abuse, concealing it, and dealing with the abuser by “moving parish”, which both bishops and superiors explicitly acknowledged.

C. Information from Records and Archives

The data on the incidence of sexual abuse uncovered in the ecclesiastical archives must be seen as the “tip of the iceberg”. The Survey suggested that an indeterminate number of victims did not report the abuse to the Catholic Church and many of the complaints were dealt with informally, leaving no document trail. There was a strong degree of probability that files may have been purged without following the rules laid down by Canon Law (a conviction shared by many clergymen contacted).

The Survey also suggested that there was significant ambiguity surrounding much of the twentieth-century church correspondence. The documentation recorded internal transfers or even a transfer to another country without providing reasons for those transfers, or simply making vague reference to the need to avoid public scandals without mentioning sexual abuse explicitly.

The reports were so ambiguous that they may refer to cases of a different sort such as embezzlement, homosexuality or involvement with adult married women. Faced with this silence of the files, the researchers stated they found themselves with a “Gordian knot”, with their efforts at quantification and analysis irretrievably compromised.

The following bullet points provide some conclusions from the archival material.

- Limited or no documentation relating to possible internal investigations.
- In the preliminary investigations of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, child and adolescent sexual abuse tend to be classified as questions of morality and good manners.
- The exponential growth in the number of documented cases from 2010 onwards reflects the implementation of the Guidelines for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons, which required the dioceses and religious institutes to follow certain defined procedures whenever allegations had been made.
- From 2010 onwards, uniform standard procedures were adopted for dealing with complaints: preliminary investigation, notifying the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, opening of criminal administrative proceedings. However, not even these standard procedures did away with the diversity of ways of implementing the Holy See’s guidelines and the operation of Commissions for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons – some of which focused more on investigation and others on support for the victims and prevention. These differences naturally make for different outcomes for those who resorted to them.
- Various forms of punishment were applied to abusers: some were sent to spiritual retreats, some were removed from their posts, some transferred to another parish, some remained in their parish but under surveillance, and others were defrocked. Only in a very small number of cases was there a trial in the civil courts.
- The primary motivation of the hierarchies was to protect the Church’s good name, by choosing to cover things up publicly (and possibly issuing warnings internally) and, in cases regarded as more serious such as “deflowering”, forcing agreements for the payment of compensation.
- The prevailing interpretation was that the Catholic Church was the aggrieved party, in cases which were made public, and this led to antagonising those who did want to remain silent.
- The victim’s suffering was not at the heart of the measures adopted.

5. Recommendations

The Commission members made the following recommendations:

For The Church:

- A new multidisciplinary Commission should be formed, with membership drawn from within and outside the Church, to continue the study and monitor the problem.
- The Church must recognise the existence and extent of the problem of abuse and make a commitment to adopting appropriate measures to prevent it in the future.
- The Hierarchy must observe the approach of “zero tolerance” as proposed by the Pope
- There should be a moral duty on the part of the Church to denounce cases of alleged crimes of sexual abuse and to collaborate with the Public Prosecutor’s Office in such case
- The Church should consider effective requests for forgiveness of situations which occurred in the past and putting them into practice.
- There needs to be ongoing external training and supervision of members of the Church, with specific reference to sexuality (their own and that of children and adolescents)
- Ceasing religious practice and meetings in closed, individual physical locations.
- Effective preventive measures including “best practice manuals” and provision of “support and locales for victims and family members to testify, and corresponding follow-up”
- Ongoing psychological help for past, present and future victims (as a responsibility of the Church and in coordination with the National Health Service- SNS)

For Civil Society:

- A national study to be carried out on child sexual abuse in the various locations.
- Unequivocal recognition of the Rights of the Child.
- Empowerment of children and families in relation to the role of the school.
- Adjusting the statute of limitations by increasing the upper age limit of the child victim.
- Speed in the courts’ assessment and response.
- Strengthening the role of the media in investigating and dealing with the problem.
- Improving emotional literacy in connection with the true development needs of children and young people, especially in the realm of love and sex.



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