

# Blaming celibacy for sex abuse is simplistic

■ Tim Costelloe



In recent days, media outlets have reported on the activity statement released by the Catholic Church's Truth, Justice and Healing Council.

The council, established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia, engages with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse on behalf of the Catholic Church nationally.

Many media reports focus on one line from the 44-page report. This is the one stating that "obligatory celibacy may have contributed to abuse in some circumstances".

This comment forms part of a discussion on "cultural" factors which may have contributed to the awful reality of abuse of the young by some clergy and religious, and links it to the notion of "clericalism".

Clericalism is best understood to be the misuse of the privileges and responsibilities which come with positions of leadership in the Church.

Christian leadership is meant to be exercised as a humble and self-sacrificing service. It is never to be a domineering and oppressive authoritarianism. It has often been noted that sexual abuse of minors is as much, if not more, about power, and the misuse of power, as it is about sexuality. This may well be where questions of celibacy and clerical sexual abuse interact.

Catholic priests are in positions of spiritual leadership and authority within the Catholic community. If they

have not been well prepared to integrate the challenges of a celibate life into their daily patterns of living,

and if they have not been well formed to understand the unique and somewhat counter-cultural nature of Christian leadership and spiritual authority as humble and compassionate service, then the potential to do damage to God's people is very real.

If, in addition, their own sexuality has not developed in healthy ways then the danger to others, especially the young, is very real.

It is for these reasons that I am fully supportive of the need to examine the complex question of clerical celibacy as we seek to identify the various factors which have contributed to the awful problem of sexual abuse of minors in our Church.

If the Church continues to link celibacy to the priesthood, as I personally believe it will and should, then the question of the contribution that compulsory celibacy for priests and bishops may have made to the abuse crisis really calls for examination of a number of key areas.

I believe these to be: the initial screening and careful selection of candidates for the priesthood; the professional psychological assessment of candidates either before entry to the seminary or in the early stages of their training in order to identify any potential problems; ongoing programs in psycho-sexual development and in the area of human development in general; regular monitoring of progress, both in the seminary itself and during the various periods of practical experience in parish communities and other settings; and provision of ready access to counselling or therapy for any seminarians who may become aware

of personal difficulties in the area of their sexuality.

All of this of course must be accompanied by an equal focus on the assimilation of gospel values as regards the true nature of Christian

leadership and service. Of course, ongoing formation and personal and professional development of clergy needs to continue after they leave priestly training and begin their lives of ministry.

One of the many profoundly disturbing aspects of the current royal commission is its discovery of the extent and prevalence of sexual abuse of minors across so many institutions, both religious and otherwise, in our country.

As I follow this tragic story, I am seeing more clearly that the problem of sexual abuse is not really about celibacy at all, but about a distorted sexuality and an unconscionable misuse of authority and power.

It is not the celibate lifestyle as such, but rather who chooses it and why, and how well prepared they are to live it fruitfully. That is the real issue.

Both within the Catholic Church and more widely we must be brave enough to identify the real causes of the scourge of sexual abuse, no matter how uncomfortable this might be.

It would be a great shame, and a betrayal of past, current and future generations of young people, if we allowed ourselves to let other questions about the practice of compulsory celibacy for clergy in the Catholic Church lead us to think that abandoning this particular tradition in the Church would somehow solve the problem.

What we need is an honest, objective and informed discussion about this question and its possible relationship to child sexual abuse, free of any preconceptions or ideological bias.

And this in its turn must form part of a much wider examination of the many possible contributing factors to the terrible problem of sexual abuse in the Church and in our society.

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