
In the febrile climate at present obfuscating debate about the sexual abuse of children in both Church and society, but especially within the Roman Catholic Church, this book is a powerful pointer towards sanity. Marie Keenan, an Irish Catholic, is a psychotherapist who has worked for over twenty years with both abusers and abused, including priests who have abused and those abused by priests. While her work centres on Ireland, much wider implications emerge. This author’s interest is in understanding what causes abuse, what makes it so difficult for Church authority to deal with it, and where a wider responsibility might be located for the state of a Church which has produced this continuing crisis. Scape-goating and stereotyping are alien to this approach. The author’s hope is that from this and other serious and sustained attempts to fathom the human phenomena a way forward can be found to the benefit of all, abused and abusers. To this end she takes the analysis beyond the failings of individual priests, bishops and religious superiors in themselves. She considers these as indicative of systemic or organizational factors which facilitate abuse and its denial or concealment.

The book is comprehensive in scope, meticulous in its attention to known facts, and remarkably well-informed about a wide variety of theoretical approaches. Its tone is dispassionate and its judgements balanced. While refreshingly free of moralising, Keenan’s conclusions provide no comfort for those who think our newly-installed safeguarding procedures are an adequate response. This is a timely warning, for there are already voices speaking as if this crisis were now over. The argument against this is that while our brave new world of child protection may prevent some abuse it does not touch the fundamentals. Some of these are clerical power without downward accountability, the conformist nature of the seminary environment including the inculcation of childish notions of obedience, bad teaching on sex coupled with a hopelessly idealised view of celibacy, and the ready availability of the confessional as an alternative to taking responsibility for one’s behaviour and its consequences for others.

A significant number of those priests who continued to abuse frequently confessed their abuse. Long ago we were taught that we had to have ‘a firm
purpose of amendment’ if we expected to be absolved of our sins. That pre-
psychological notion now has its bluff well and truly called. A priest con-
victed of sexual abuse pointed out recently that ‘the sacrament gave us
permission to sin’. If abusive behaviour is seen primarily as an offence
against God, remediable by way of a private and secret transaction in the
confessional, the question of responsibility for the abused person scarcely
arises, still less has priority. There is no reason to suppose that such priests
were insincere, and Keenan certainly does not suggest this, though she
comments that there might be questions about how frank such confessions
were about the nature of the abuse. Confessional practice as we have it
lends itself to circumlocution and evasion. The question of the seal, raised
recently by the Irish government, is in any case a very serious one: can con-
fidentiality ever be an absolute regardless of circumstances?

A further critical point about our new procedures which Keenan men-
tions, but has no scope to develop in this book, is that they are already
spawning injustices to accused priests. Of course the suffering of a falsely
accused priest cannot be compared to that of an abused child, but that
does not mean that it is of little or no account. Our author protests most
strongly against the demonization of accused priests, as of supposedly neg-
ligent or unfeeling bishops, who she sees as by and large conscientiously
following the norms of the organizational culture of the Church. That is
precisely the trouble, and her deployment of this theme is much more dev-
astating than a charge of mere negligence. Others have written of the
diseased clerical culture which inculcates habits of immaturity and irre-
 sponsibility in the interests of preserving the supposed unity and good
name of the institution at all costs.

The responsibilities of the Irish state and of the Vatican for not having
taken the matter of child sexual abuse sufficiently seriously are also scruti-
nised here. The inadequacies of Pope Benedict XVI’s letter to the Catholics
of Ireland are indicated, not least the remarkable failure to acknowledge, or
perhaps even to recognise, the Vatican’s share of responsibility for what has
occurred. To add insult to injury, the apostolic visitation of parts of the
Catholic Church in Ireland, set up after this book was written, has set in
train reforms in the seminaries which will intensify some of the features
which Keenan identifies as contributing to the abusive climate: a tighten-
ing of ‘orthodoxy’ in the teaching, and further segregation of seminarians
from lay students.

In her book Captives the historian Linda Colley moves away from
the fashionable emphasis on the harm done to those colonised by British