

“Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain”

A submission by the lay Catholic organisation *Voice of the Faithful (Ulster)*

(a) Prevention

In relation to raising awareness of the issue of sexual violence for the purposes of prevention, we in VOTF believe the NI executive should encourage religious institutions to cooperate fully in the drive to reduce sexual violence, especially by facilitating opportunities for open internal discussion of the issue.

We believe this encouragement to be especially necessary in the case of our own Catholic church because of:

- (a) Catholic teaching on the dignity of the human person;
- (b) our church's considerable role in educating children;
- (c) our church's potential role in adult education;
- (d) our church's current unhealthy internal climate of avoidance of the issue of sexual violence, which discourages healthy discussion and debate and therefore retards the development of healthy attitudes on the issue.

With regard to (d) we are aware of no opportunity provided by our church leadership to the wider church to discuss the issue of sexual violence since 1994, when the specific issue of clerical child sexual abuse first emerged in Ireland. As our bishops themselves said in their document *"Towards Healing"* (February 2005), most sexual violence is unrelated to clergy or other church personnel, and our church community as a whole needs to respond to the harm caused by all sexual violence. However, this document was never presented to the wider church for discussion, and soon disappeared from view. No open internal discussion of the global issue of sexual violence followed. We find this wholly inexplicable and regrettable.

We therefore ask the NI executive to encourage the leadership of our church to provide opportunities for open internal discussion and adult education, within a framework of Catholic faith, on one of the major dangers to the health of our children and of our wider community.

(b) Protection

On the issue of protection against sexual violence, VOTF believes the NI Executive should encourage religious institutions to further develop their role in safeguarding young people, for example by:

- (a) involving parents in a wide-ranging discussion of this issue, with a view to developing clear and agreed boundaries for safe teenage behaviour;
- (b) encouraging greater parental involvement in the supervision of the recreational activities of young people;
- (c) increasing the resourcing and provision of safe, supervised recreational activities for young people;

(d) giving greater support to the excellent work already being done by volunteer organisations working in this field.

We also believe that greater consideration needs to be given to the vulnerability and need for protection of disabled people, as advocated in the accompanying MACSAS critique by Margaret Kennedy, who is also one of our members.

(c) Support

In relation to support for victims of sexual violence, we believe the NI Executive needs to take more account of the need for victims to find a context in which they can tell their stories to sympathetic carers who may, or may not, be professionals in the field.

With this in view, we in VOTF believe:

- (a) that there should be a state inquiry into the handling of cases of sexual abuse by church personnel in religious institutions in NI, involving the examination of institutional records and the gathering of evidence and testimony from victims,
- (b) that religious institutions should be encouraged to facilitate lay organisations set up to provide a safe and caring context for victims' stories to be told;
- (c) that the Catholic church leadership should be encouraged to follow through on its proposals in its own document of 2005, *Towards Healing*, to mobilise the 'whole church community' in support of victims of sexual violence;
- (d) that there needs to be greater emphasis upon the need for extended professional counselling of victims of serious sexual violence, as recommended by professionals working in this field, and that this should be resourced from public finances.

We in VOTF would also welcome professional advice and training in the care and support of victims, among whom we are already networking effectively for purposes of mutual support. We hope for continuing contact with the Sexual Violence Unit, so that we can be sure of hearing more immediately about publications and consultation initiatives such as "*Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain*".

Conclusion

We are very grateful for the opportunity to comment belatedly upon "*Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain*" but are concerned to understand why we did not get to hear of it until April 26th, 2007. We would like to know what request was made to our church leadership with regard to the distribution of the document and the publicising of the associated consultation process, in January 2007.

The primary goal of *Voice of the Faithful* in Ireland is the support of victims of sexual violence. Our website <http://www.votfi.com> will give further details of our mission and goals.