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BETRAYAL OF TRUST

The Catholic Church is accountable for its members and I think they would have to have a very serious look at the behaviour of priests in future. I know it's very difficult for a priest now to go into a home and touch a child. I mean, that is something that is very unfortunate but people need to build up faith again. And the Church would need to have a very good look at what is happening. Smyth might be an isolated case but I do not know what the future holds but in our case the Church has been absolutely no help whatsoever and I find that very sad because to me there's a law for Church members and a law for their parishioners or for members of their flock.

Seamus, father of four children abused by Fr Smyth, speaking shortly before the priest was jailed at Belfast Crown Court.

From the very first moment we met, I knew Bernie was one of life's achievers, someone who would refuse to take

no for an answer - a mother of four children who had all been subjected to Fr Smyth's perverted behaviour, who was to become a priceless asset in the pursuit of the truth; her determination to wrestle justice out of betrayal and mistrust an essential tool in digging for facts.

Stung by the lack of assistance from the Catholic Church, she and her husband Seamus were now prepared to throw their weight behind any activity that would expose the continuing cover-up within a section of the Church. They were disgusted by the attitude of the local parish when they made approaches for help and as far as they were concerned the Church had turned its back on them in their hour of need. When Seamus went to the local parochial house to inform their parish priest what had been happening to his children, there was not so much as a telephone call in response, never mind a house call. The couple had hoped to get some support, perhaps someone to come and talk to the children, to offer something, practical and/or spiritual, to guide them through what was the most painful experience ever to happen the family. Seamus says he made it clear to the local priest that he realised that the case may well have been a one-off, and he was not going to allow this to dispose him to tar all priests with the same brush. Indeed, in his experience as someone baptised and reared as a Catholic, he had found most priests genuine and caring.

Sally had put me in touch with Bernie and Seamus and when I first met them in their home in West Belfast in February 1994, I discovered that no one in the house was attending Mass. The facts of their case make it easy to understand why they no longer practise their faith. The

story of Bernie and Seamus, more than any other, epitomises the depths to which Fr Brendan Smyth was prepared to sink.

It was in the early 1950s that Bernie first met the priest. He was then in his mid-twenties. Even in these early days of his religious life, he could afford a car and made regular journeys from County Cavan to his old childhood haunts on the Falls Road. Visiting the side-streets off the Falls, he would sign Mass cards to supplement his income and at the same time he was in a position to bring over the border the odd couple of pounds of butter which were in more plentiful supply down south. On the way back to the abbey at Ballyjamesduff, he would buy supplies of electrical goods to smuggle into the Republic. And, of course, while he was in Belfast the old school friends he visited were prepared to slip him a pound here and there.

Bernie remembers the priest calling at her mother's house in West Belfast and that her parents regarded it an honour to have a priest call regularly. Fr Smyth watched Bernie grow up, met her friends and eventually her boyfriends, and when Seamus and Bernie decided to get married, it was Fr Smyth who performed the wedding service, as a wedding gift, he said. There was a bond of friendship which lasted many, many years as Fr Smyth honoured Bernie and Seamus too with his presence in their new home.

The only reason Seamus knew Fr Smyth was because of the connections with Bernie's family. He enjoyed the hours he spent in conversation with the priest, chatting about politics, theology and travel, particularly about his adventures in the United States. In politics, the priest leaned towards the republican viewpoint but according to Seamus, he could make an intelligent argument on any of

the topics they discussed as they whiled away many a pleasant hour in the midst of great political upheaval in West Belfast. The priest shared Seamus's interest in cars. He drove thousands of miles in the year and according to Seamus, he would change the car every year or so, because of the high mileage. Fr Smyth watched Seamus and Bernie's four children grow up. He was always there to play with them, bring them sweeties or take them away for trips in his car, sometimes overnight journeys to Dublin and beyond. He was always welcome in their home.

Then it all began to fall apart as they started to learn the truth about the priest who had been part of their lives from the very first moment they'd met. In November 1988 Bernie and Seamus had a visitor who had been a very close friend of the family right from the 1950s. This young man, let us call him Anthony, had lived in the same street as Sally and, like Sally, his parents befriended the priest from Kilnacrott Abbey, offering him the freedom to come and go as he pleased and occasionally giving the young cleric presents of money. Now in 1988 the young man was distraught; for years he had carried the burden of Fr Smyth's sexual assaults on him without telling anyone. It became a major problem when he got married and there is no doubt in his mind that it was the major factor in the break-up of his marriage.

Anthony asked if Bernie and Seamus could help him by providing their home as a venue for a confrontation with Fr Smyth and they were happy to oblige. The occasion chosen was the confirmation of one of their own children. Anthony shocked them with his story of sexual abuse by Fr Smyth going back almost thirty years to when he was

a child of six. The confrontation took place as planned, with Bernie and Seamus by agreement out of the house at the moment Anthony challenged the priest about the years of sexual abuse he had been forced to endure. When Fr Smyth learned that Anthony was now attending counselling, he even suggested that he too should go to the same therapist but this was an offer which Anthony felt no difficulty refusing. It was, incidentally, the last time Fr Smyth ever entered Bernie's home. Bernie and Seamus have not spoken to him since that day in February 1989.

Anthony's nightmare of abuse lasted for many years, right up into his early teens, and he was beginning to wonder if his brothers or other young people had been interfered with in the same way. By the time he came to see Bernie and Seamus he had already discovered that his younger brother John had also been abused throughout the sixties and seventies. It was not easy to find the courage to face close friends and relatives to tell them about this, that the priest they so respected and admired was a criminal with, apparently, no remorse for the dreadful activities he engaged in with the children of his former school friends.

In Seamus and Bernie's home, Anthony quietly told them about his experiences. They sat in wonder at his tale of suffering. They were horrified and devastated to hear how devious Fr Smyth had been over the years he was sexually abusing Anthony. Then came the dreaded moment when Anthony asked his friends if they had noticed any abnormal behaviour from their kids when Fr Smyth was around.

This is where the lives of this hard-working couple began to fray at the edges; this was the beginning of a nightmare which persists to this day and will, in all

probability, stay with them forever. They were devastated by Anthony's tale of corruption. What made matters even worse was the realisation that there had been odd behaviour on the part of their children in the past which they had put down to childish notions. Now, with the benefit of hindsight they saw that certain behaviour patterns tended to coincide with visits of Fr Smyth.

Bernie and Seamus felt that night that something in their lives was lost for ever. Almost immediately recriminations began; a dreadful feeling of guilt overwhelmed them. Had they really missed something obvious? Had they let their children down? How could Fr Smyth have done this to them? They recalled edgy reactions in their kids at the first sign of Fr Smyth in the street outside. They would bolt out the back of the house or snuggle into a seat beside their parents. The parents put this down to the childish games and pranks the priest played but now as Anthony opened his heart to them they realised there was probably a sinister side to it. Their children had not yet confirmed any of this information to them. This task lay ahead. And it took many months before they could bring themselves to chat to the kids. Fr Smyth was not around; after the confrontation with Anthony he tended to make himself scarce around those homes in West Belfast where Anthony's friends lived. For months Bernie and Seamus contemplated their next move, not pushing the kids too hard and not wishing to intrude on their suffering. However everyone in the family realised that the issue of Fr Brendan Smyth would have to be confronted very soon.

Christmas 1988 was not the usual happy family affair. Bernie and Seamus had a lot on their minds as they watched the kids open their presents on Christmas

morning. Their stomachs churned at the thought of what these innocents had suffered at the hands of the man they had revered, that their children were concealing hideous pain inflicted by this priest.

This nagging pain has not left them and for Seamus, the suffering has found expression in writing. This poem illustrates the inner feelings of someone who feels betrayed. It comes from the depths of a man riddled with anger one moment, with misplaced guilt the next, and a deep bewilderment about the sordid actions of the priest whose company he so enjoyed over the years.

Victim of a Child Sex Abuser

To the young and innocent he must come,
On his face a disarming smile,
But evil in his heart.
Yet he bore no sign to tell of his intent.
The young warm body was his need;
Its personal privacy his desire.
Boy or girl, he did not care,
The feelings should be the same,
As long as they were young, innocent and available.
Victims were sought far and wide,
In places where he would feel secure
To use his hands on children
Who did not know the meaning of his sickly smile.

The first caress would be a start,
From which his heart would race,
And feelings of pleasure would engulf

His evil being to say, this feels good,
Next time I will feel a little more.
The first touch, I thought, an accident?
His hands so sure and quick.
About the second I was not so sure
But the third and the fourth
Scramble my thoughts while my body tingled.
Was this right or was it wrong?
My scrambled thoughts would ask.
I did not know. I was too young to understand
That, however pleasant, evil deeds were being done.
My troubled thoughts would often ask,
What could I do? Who would believe me?
No one, he said, would believe me.
With my innocence gone, I was seriously troubled.

Many long years have passed,
And still I do not feel free from all the attention
That he gave me.
God, would I ever feel free
From the horrors of my childhood.
We are told, you said, we should forgive and forget,
I am sorry, God: that I cannot do.
The abuser was one of your representatives;
Because of this, I trusted him,
Now, I wonder, do you really care?

Now as I sat sipping a cup of midday coffee with Bernie and Seamus, I was struck by the sincerity of a couple who in the face of adversity could still smile and crack jokes. From the outset they wanted me to know that their story,

if I was to be permitted to tell it, must not be told in an insensitive manner, in a salacious way. They knew that Fr Smyth had been offending for many years. They also believed that this must have been known to his immediate superiors. However they did not believe that the Norbertine Order or the hierarchy were prepared to take whatever steps were necessary to ensure that Fr Smyth was punished and that he did not have the opportunity to re-offend. I knew from the conversation that they had no real desire to have me hear their story. If another way could have been found to heal the betrayal they had suffered, that is the route they would have taken. I was left in no doubt that the only reason I was in their home was that, in their view, publicly describing their pain was their only recourse. Had the Church taken the time at least to sympathise with the family, to offer some kind of tangible assistance in their hour of need, Bernie and Seamus would not be sitting with me in their living-room speaking about the dreadful hurt done to their children and, of course, to themselves.

Shortly after Anthony had revealed Fr Smyth's secret life as a paedophile Bernie and Seamus very gingerly broached the subject of sex abuse with their children, full of trepidation at the very thought of it. It is not the kind of situation parents are prepared for, not the kind of thing you do every day.

For Bernie, it was an ordeal: she discovered that on several occasions while she was in the kitchen preparing a meal, Fr Smyth was in the living-room sexually assaulting her children. If someone had tried to suggest such a thing in the past, she would have regarded him or her as a liar. But this, unfortunately, was no lie: this was the sad, sordid

truth about betrayal. As they listened to their children recount their tales about Fr Smyth, the couple were moved to tears. Seamus thought about the abuse of trust by the priest and could not help feeling that perhaps there never was any value in the friendship he thought he shared with Fr Smyth, that perhaps the only reason for the frequent visits from the cleric was access to the children in the house.

For over twelve months Bernie and Seamus lived their lives in a maelstrom of emotions: anger, frustration, hurt, pain and worst of all the inability to see clearly enough to make the next move. That decision was effectively made for them in February, 1990 when Susan, one of their daughters, was speaking to a social worker at the offices of the Catholic Family Welfare Society in Belfast. She had reason to speak to someone about a totally unrelated matter and in the course of her conversation revealed to the startled social worker that she had suffered sex abuse in childhood and that her abuser was a priest by the name of Brendan Smyth. This meeting on 23 February was historic for it represented the beginning of the end of Fr Brendan Smyth's life as a child sex abuser. The social worker advised Bernie that according to law, the police would have to be informed and thus the decision about what to do next was taken for Bernie and Seamus. The family doctor was contacted so that counselling sessions for the children could begin immediately. Once the police were informed, they too would have to see the children but before that happened the parents had an opportunity to speak to the police about how they would proceed with the case. Bernie and Seamus arranged to meet the female sergeant who would initially take charge of the inquiry on 2 March 1990.

Statistically, Susan became one of the thousand cases of child sex abuse reported every year in the greater Belfast area, of which less than half end up in the courts. When an allegation of abuse is made it is not just the police who move into action. There is a special process involving social services in a joint investigation and by the time detectives actually meet the individual making the allegations quite a bit of ground work has been done into the accuser's background, the family and the suspected perpetrator. Younger children are taken to the RUC's Child Care Unit, a purpose-built bungalow located inside a Belfast police station, where the child is made to feel as comfortable as possible away from the more intimidating atmosphere of a police interview room. It is here that the police and social services have specially trained officers to conduct an interview with the principal objective of gathering what Sergeant William McAuley describes as 'evidence at its best quality'. It is not that children are any less believable than adults but when it comes to a criminal court case, the child's evidence must be presented in the way that shows honesty and validity. Great care must be taken to search out as much corroborating evidence as possible, checking with other witnesses to ensure that the child's description of times, dates and whereabouts tally. The Child Care Unit is also fitted with specialised medical equipment under the control of forensic medical officers who try to uncover uncontaminated evidence to back up the statements made by the accuser. In many cases where the allegations are not made until some years after the abuses have taken place, there is no hope of finding this quality of forensic evidence and so it is down to good old-fashioned detective work and interviewing

technique to substantiate the allegations by means of corroborating statements or by confessions from the accused. Such was the case for the children of Bernie and Seamus.

From the outset, Bernie and Seamus were reassured by the manner of the police officer that their case would be thoroughly investigated and that, most important of all, the investigation would be conducted sensitively with the children's best interests as the priority. It was agreed that a local health board office would be a more suitable venue for the first meeting between the children and police. On 7 March the social worker called at Bernie and Seamus's house and with the family packed into two cars the children were driven to the appointed place to begin playing their part. It was here that specially trained police officers gently persuaded the kids to talk aloud of their experiences and of the nightmare that followed. It was here that the police began to build up a picture of the paedophile priest. As far as Bernie and Seamus were concerned, at last someone was prepared to listen to their story and to take seriously the allegations of sexual misconduct against the priest with a view to preventing his hurting more children.

The greatest challenge for investigators is to satisfy themselves that children tell the truth and that they do it in such a way as to give the prosecution the best possible evidence to proceed to court. Notes were carefully taken of times, dates and places: as much detail as the children could remember, given that they were searching their memories for details of events going back a good many years. Bernie and Seamus were deeply impressed by the demeanour of the police officers, by the care and sympathy

shown to the children as they relived the horrors of the past. They were not themselves present during the interviews as they thought their presence might inhibit the kids.

As he learned more about the priest's ability to carry out these assaults under the very noses of the parents, Seamus realised just how much Fr Smyth used his intelligence to get away with his crimes. He recalled occasions when the children were in their bedrooms with flu or a toothache and how the priest was allowed to go up there and spend time alone with them. Bernie and Seamus brought their children up to enjoy some privacy when in their own rooms. That attitude still obtains, as Seamus candidly admits that as long as the children are receiving proper counselling to help them rebuild shattered lives, neither he nor Bernie need ever push them into revealing to them all the details of the abuses. They thought the children's first visit to the police, on 7 March 1990, would bring a swift conclusion to the whole affair and allow them all to try to get on with their lives.

I spent several hours in their home that first day as Bernie and Seamus gave me a detailed account of their experiences. By the time I left I had begun to understand the magnitude of the story and the reason for their feeling of utter frustration. I came away with an overwhelming admiration for the fortitude of individuals bonded together in a family prepared to face adversity as one. It was here, in a Catholic home in West Belfast, that the words cover-up were first used . . . the cover-up that was to be exposed in the coming months, showing that over a period of many years, a number of individuals within the Norbertine Order knew of Fr Smyth's paedophilia but chose not to use the law to deal with the problem.