



# TIDINGS

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## Diocese of Manchester official addresses clergy sexual abuse

*In light of a Diocese of Manchester priest recently being charged with sexually abusing a minor, Msgr. Francis Christian, diocesan chancellor, recently discussed with TIDINGS sexual abuse and the clergy. The interview follows.*

**In New England and across the country, we seem to be seeing more reports of sexual misconduct on the part of the clergy. It almost seems like an epidemic. Why does it seem that this problem is so much more prevalent and severe today?**

I think we're seeing a lot of it today because it's an evil in society that we're becoming more informed about and conscious of. This is not just a problem that affects the church; it's a problem that affects society as a whole.

If you open the paper any day, you'll find stories about psychologists and their patients, about teachers and schoolchildren, about people who have been abused sexually by persons from a broad cross-section of society.

I think this kind of abuse many years ago was the kind of thing that made people feel ashamed of themselves. It was something that was hidden. Now, more and more, people are coming forward with their stories, and that then unlocks the possibility for other people to come forward with their stories as well.

So I think this is happening now basically because the fact of sexual abuse in society has only recently come to the fore. It was hidden and locked away before, taboo to speak about. Now it is becoming more consciously dealt with, and these things are finally coming to light.

**So do you think that in the past there were just as many incidences of abuse in society, but in the past the social stigma of being abused meant that many incidences were never reported?**

I believe that's probably true. I don't think we necessarily have more cases of this occurring today than ever. I think it's more the fact that in the past these things simply weren't talked about; they weren't dealt with.

**You said this problem isn't exclusive to the clergy. But why has there been such a focus in the media and in conversation on clergy sexual abuse?**

We have to be careful that we don't generalize the problem. Simply because some psychologists are guilty of sexual abuse with their patients doesn't mean that all psychologists have this problem. In the same way, because there are some clergy who have had a problem with sexual abuse, whether with children or adults, we shouldn't take those cases and generalize that this is a broader problem than it really is.

We are tempted to generalize because, as you said, these stories are before us all the time. But when you look at the percentage of priests, or the percentage of any other area of society, it really is a very, very small percentage.

It's healthy that we're discovering these problems so that we can deal with them, but we have to be careful that we don't generalize to the detriment of all clergy. Of course, even one case is serious and tragic.

**So it's not fair to say that a priest or other clergyman is more likely to abuse a child or to have illicit sexual relations with an adult than a nonclergyman?**

It's very true that there's no more likelihood, and probably less likelihood, of clergy abusing than of others doing so. From my understanding, if we were to look at the number of child abuse cases, even sexual abuse cases, that are reported to the state every day, you'd find a high percentage of those coming from family situations — by that I mean parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and so forth. The clergy is not more prone to this problem than other areas of society.

I think when a clergyman has this problem, however, it is more shocking to us. The priest, the clergyman, stands in a position of trust and in a position of representing God, so that in a sense it's more disappointing to people when he has this problem. And because it's more disappointing, it becomes more widely publicized and more a subject for conversation. But I don't think that the incidence of abuse by clergy is proportionately any higher than any place else in society.

Because the priest preaches the Word of God, because he administers the sacraments, people expect of him a lifestyle that is holier than what they expect of themselves. That's understandable, and that's why it becomes such a difficulty for people when it is a priest who is involved with this kind of problem.

**The church nationally has been accused by the media and others of ignoring these problems. How would you address that question?**

There is no instance in the Diocese of Manchester that I am aware of where we have not completely and thoroughly investigated a problem. We have never, never, reassigned a priest to any kind of duty until we judged that there was no significant risk to another party, based on independent, professional evaluation.

That doesn't mean that in the past the church as a whole hasn't made mistakes. But those mistakes were made out of ignorance, not out of a lack of concern.

Twenty or 25 years ago, society as a whole and the church did not understand what they were dealing with. In those days, people thought it was a moral problem. They thought that people only had to be spiritually renewed and they could then avoid these problems in the future. We now know that is not the case.

When abusers were sent away for treatment they may not have been treated in the right way, because the experts didn't know how to treat them. Society didn't know how to treat these situations.

So mistakes were probably made, but if so they were made out of ignorance, not out of malevolence.

Part of the difficulty today is that people look back at these problems 20 or 25 years ago and are judging the church today on what we should have done 25 years ago, if we knew then what we know today. But you can't judge those situations that way; you can't project back into the past what is known now, with the type of professional help now available.

**What about the victims? How does the victim deal with being abused by someone they trust, whether it's a priest, family member or care provider?**

We must understand that the kind of transgression of trust we're talking about is very, very painful because you have innocent victims who, especially if they are children, are more easily caught up in this because of their trust for their abuser. Obviously, we have to be very much concerned about the victims, to make sure that they get the proper care and attention that they need. And we have to be sure that we're not exposing other people to future harm.

We can never, ever, minimize the damage that is done to the victim, and we have to be careful that we never expose other people to same kind of problem if a priest is responsible and is unable to bring that problem under control. The pastoral mission of the church for its members, especially those who suffer these abuses, must be paramount.

**Is there anything that the church can do so that there are fewer victims of sexual abuse by clergy?  
Are there screening processes available at the seminary level or perhaps for the man who has been a priest for a number of years?**

For the last 15 years the Diocese of Manchester has required all applicants to undergo complete and thorough psychological testing before they are accepted as seminarians. The same is true of every other diocese and religious community I'm aware of.

That testing is very helpful, but we have to understand that the tests that we currently have will not definitively pinpoint a sexual problem. Those tests can show us whether the person is a well-balanced individual, whether there are any outstanding emotional or personality problems. But by themselves the tests do not easily identify sexual-orientation or sexual problems. Obviously the testing is helpful, but not totally sufficient.

That's why the role of formation in the seminary becomes very crucial. The evaluation made of the man as he goes through the seminary, the monitoring of his experience in parishes during the pastoral formation phases of his education — all of that is very important. But in spite of everything, it's probably not possible to guarantee in advance, in every case, that a man to be ordained does not have a specific problem.

What's most important is that when we become aware of a priest with a problem, we act immediately and decisively.

**What happens, then, when the Diocese of Manchester is made aware of allegations of sexual abuse involving a priest?**

We investigate every complaint immediately and completely. If that complaint proves to be substantive in any way, we then place the priest on administrative leave and seek appropriate therapeutic counseling for him, as well as provide care for the victim or victims. We also report to the state agencies as required by law if minors are involved. And, to be sure there are no future victims, we never return a man to any kind of priestly ministry unless we have assurances from competent professionals that he is able to have these particular problems under very strict control. This policy is followed to the letter.

**So if the counselor or doctor tells the diocese that a priest has sexual abuse tendencies, but that the tendencies can be controlled, that priest might be returned to active ministry?**

In our pastoral practice, a priest who has had this kind of problem can be returned to some kind of ministry only if that problem is under control according to competent authorities and only under a very strict set of circumstances, which involve ongoing therapy, ongoing spiritual direction, various forms of support groups, and, in most cases, a kind of ministry that does not bring him into contact with those he might be tempted to harm.

So, for example, if the man were going to be returned to ministry with the assurances of professionals, and with those safeguards in place, it would normally be in a ministry where he would not be in contact with young children, if his problem had been with young children.

There might also be cases where the professionals cannot give us reasonable assurances, and in that instance we could then not return a man to ministry. Those are very sad and unfortunate circumstances, but because of our concern for possible future victims, we simply cannot return the priest to any kind of ministry.

**A question that's often asked is how can anyone, especially a priest, harm a child in that way? How can something like that happen?**

This is not an easy problem to understand. It's not first and foremost a question of a man simply being morally weak. It's not a question of a man who consciously and freely chooses to engage in this kind of behavior. Most people, men or women, no matter what profession they are in, who have this type of problem have it as an addictive emotional problem. In some instances their freedom is diminished in what they do for reasons that even today are psychologically difficult to determine. In this regard, these types of addictive problems are similar to substance abuse problems, like alcoholism.

The compulsive nature of the problem, however, certainly does not diminish the terrible hurt it causes the victims. We can never do enough to help them heal that hurt, and make sure no one else is hurt in the future.

**That leads to a difficult question. Some popular media have speculated that the promise of celibacy required of the priest can lead to these kinds of abuses, or to illicit sexual relationships with adults. Do you think that's a fair speculation?**

I really don't. When we look at the broad range of society, we see that there are many, many people who have these problems who are not celibates. Parents, doctors, lawyers, teachers — most of these people who have this problem are not celibate. To say that it's because of celibacy that priests fall into this type of problem does not square with the facts of the situation.

It's a kind of problem that is addictive in nature, a problem that we're coming to understand more clearly. But I don't think it can be connected in any direct way to celibacy.

I think that celibacy is a lifestyle that is so out-of-the-ordinary and so uncommon that many people have a hard time understanding how it's possible for a man or a woman to live a celibate life. This lack of understanding makes it tempting to think that celibacy is so difficult that priests or religious need to find some kind of sexual outlet and therefore are more prone to this type of problem. But that is not a tenable position when you look at the broad spectrum of society.

**When these allegations arise, what affect does it have on the church? And what affect does it have on diocesan priests, especially a priest assigned to a parish.**

It certainly is a very painful experience for the whole church, for everyone from the bishop to the people in the pews. When a spiritual leader has problems, that is a source of pain and disappointment to everybody.

I think that most people have a mixture of emotional responses. They are obviously very saddened because of the position of leadership and trust that has been betrayed. Sometimes I'm sure they're angry because they feel that someone being victimized by a priest is worse than being victimized by anyone else.

But I also think that the average person, whether priest or layperson, has a great amount of concern and compassion for all the people involved. They're very concerned and compassionate toward the victims, and they realize that we have to help the victims. Most people also tend to feel compassionate for the priest who has the problem, because they recognize that this man is in great pain himself, that he agonizes over the fact that, because of his addiction, he has jeopardized himself and the church, and has hurt another person.

And I think that most people are forgiving after they've worked things out in their own minds. They recognize that we are called to forgiveness. While we don't minimize the terribleness of the situation, especially for the victim, we are called to be a forgiving people. This whole spectrum of feelings and emotion is there.

**A priest I know recently reflected that in the face of all these public allegations today, he is much more careful in his physical presence to the parish, even to the point of hesitating to hug or play with his young parishioners. It seems tragic that that kind of innocent love and affection almost can no longer be shown by a priest for the children of his parish without allegations or questions being raised.**

That kind of thing is one of the very unfortunate side-effects of all this. I think for the average priest the greatest personal pain, after all these other feelings, is wondering if, when he stands in the pulpit to preach, his own parishioners can look at him without question or without doubt. I suppose in a sense it's understandable how the average parishioner would be hard-pressed not to have these questions and doubts.

That's part of the tragedy, that there's a breakdown in the ability we have in looking at one another and really knowing one another honestly, without question.

I also think many priests do find that the question of how to express wholesome love for members of his parish is difficult. We have an image in the Scriptures of Jesus laying His hands on the children. Because we are bodily people, the touching and the hugging and the laying on of hands in many different ways are signs of our affection.

For many children over the years when a priest hugged them they were also being hugged by God. That's very important for a child. If we can't do that anymore, then we've lost something, and that's very sad.

## Have we lost that something? Can a priest still show innocent, physical affection?

Many priests find this a problem, there's no doubt about it. I think there are many who probably still feel that, even with the risks, this is something too important not to do. So they are very careful to show affection only when other people are around, or only when parents are present.

On the other hand, we have to realize that most people are reasonable, and most people have good sense. While there are certainly questions and concerns, I really believe that most people get beyond their initial questions, and realize that when a story comes out about a priest, they do not generalize.

## Have you had to reflect on this personally as a weekend parish priest? Have you had to stop and think, "Maybe I shouldn't give this boy or girl a hug after Mass. Maybe that's not appropriate anymore"?

I have to be more careful about what is appropriate today, and what isn't. Where I feel I have to be very careful is when I find myself with a child in private someplace. When I am in the sacristy after Mass, for example, and there is one altar server there, and no one else around. I really have to be careful in a situation like that, so that no action, no matter how innocent, is misunderstood.

But when I'm with people in general I really don't want to stop showing that kind of affection because it's very important that people feel the touch of God. Maybe there is a possibility of misunderstanding, but again I think that people are generally reasonable about that sort of thing. The priest needs to be more sensitive to the fact that some people and some children don't want to be hugged, don't want to be touched.

To say that we shouldn't do any of that any more is probably going too far. I think that there are ways and times to express that kind of affection, and that will hopefully not be lost.

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