

**Introduction**

35.1 In June 1992, Fr Noel Reynolds was appointed parish priest of Glendalough, Co Wicklow. He was just under 60 years of age. This was his first appointment as a parish priest. It was while there in 1994 that, according to a statement given to Gardaí, concerns were expressed to a neighbouring curate about his behaviour with young children. Among those concerns were that he talked “*dirty*” to a group of children aged between 11 and 12, that he spoke to them in a sexual manner, that he was in the habit of bringing young children for walks, that he encouraged them to swim naked in the river, that he would bring them in his car and have them sitting on his lap while driving and that he exchanged sweets for kisses. Some of the children spoke to their school principal telling him that they did not feel safe with the priest. These matters were reported to the chancellor, Monsignor Stenson, in September 1995.

**Background**

35.2 Fr Reynolds had been a priest for just over 30 years at this stage. He was ordained in 1959. He had entered Clonliffe College in 1952 on the personal recommendation of Archbishop McQuaid after he was deemed unsuitable to train as a Holy Ghost Father. He had been educated by the Holy Ghosts.

35.3 He had attended boarding school from the age of eight. He was extremely lonely and it was noted in a psychological report by Dr Patrick Walsh of the Granada Institute in May 1997 that he (Fr Reynolds) recalled going through classes and falling for young attractive boys although he was totally unconscious of any sexual content to such attractions. Dr Walsh noted that he was warned from time to time against special relationships by the dean of studies.

35.4 His passage through Clonliffe was unremarkable but Dr Walsh noted in his psychological report that it was clear from the time of his ordination that Fr Reynolds had a special interest in ministry to children. It was also noted that he had children sit on his knee during confessions.

- 35.5 He spent periods as a chaplain to a number of girls' schools before being appointed in 1969 as a curate to Kilmore Road parish. He stayed in this parish until 1978.
- 35.6 During the course of his curacy at Kilmore Road he wrote a very unusual seven-page letter to Archbishop Ryan about the deep unrest that was permeating his life. He stated that *"a feeling of unrest has been continually with me for the past six months or so. I am upset by the quality of my life...Would it be possible to live with the poor? To live with a family..."*.
- 35.7 At this stage, Fr Reynolds had already begun abusing children. While the Commission accepts that to live among the poor may be a commendable desire for a priest, it is nevertheless surprised that this letter did not lead to some further assessment of the suitability of Fr Reynolds for parish work.
- 35.8 The mother of one of the complainants told the Commission that he was a constant presence in their home over a period of seven years while in Kilmore Parish. He would take meals with the family and watch television with them. He would ask permission to wish the girls goodnight and unknown to her was abusing them in their own bedroom.
- 35.9 Fr Reynolds's friendship with children was noted in the area as he constantly brought young children to his home as well as on outings to the sea. A priest of the diocese who was an altar boy around this time vividly remembers the fact that young girls were constantly around Fr Reynolds. While he himself did not witness any impropriety he felt that this kind of lifestyle made Fr Reynolds vulnerable to having a complaint made against him.
- 35.10 From 1978 until August 1983 he was in East Wall parish. While there, the parish priest went into Fr Reynolds's bedroom one evening to turn off the light and noted a female lying asleep in his bed. He considered she was around 30 years old. According to his statement to Gardaí in July 1997, he said he was shocked by the discovery but that he did not speak to Fr Reynolds or anybody else about the matter.

- 35.11 It is highly unlikely that the female in Fr Reynolds' bed was a 30-year-old woman given his admitted propensity for young children. Later, in his garda interviews, Fr Reynolds admitted to abusing a female teenager over a period of two days while he was in East Wall and the evidence strongly suggests that it was that teenager who was in Fr Reynolds's bed.
- 35.12 In 1983 he sought a transfer from Dublin to an island posting so that he could "*be more in tune with the people*". He told the Archbishop that he wanted "*to give away everything (or as much as possible) and separate myself from life in Dublin where there are far too many distractions*".
- 35.13 In July the Archbishop told him that he had written to the Archbishop of Tuam with a view to finding an island home for him: "*Meanwhile I am informing him of your identity which so far as been carefully concealed*".
- 35.14 When he did identify Fr Reynolds as the priest seeking the transfer, Archbishop Ryan assured Archbishop Cunnane of Tuam "*that Father Noel Reynolds is a dedicated and devoted priest and will give good service to the Islanders*". No assessment was done of him prior to assigning him to Tuam. In his interviews with the Gardaí, Fr Reynolds admitted to abusing on the island but did not identify the victims.
- 35.15 After leaving the island he spent some time in Bonnybrook parish and studying prior to being appointed as a curate in Saggart, Co Dublin. In 1992 he was appointed parish priest of Glendalough and in 1994, the concerns outlined above were raised.

### **The Church's investigation**

- 35.16 In October 1995, Archbishop Connell issued a decree initiating a preliminary investigation into complaints from Glendalough under canon 1717 of the code of canon law (see Chapter 4). Monsignor Stenson was appointed as delegate. It was not until late February 1996 that Monsignor Stenson met the school principal to receive details of the complaint. Because the allegations related to matters outside the school, the principal had recommended to the parents of the girls involved that they contact Archbishop's House or the health board's director of community care. They were unwilling to do that. Monsignor Stenson told the Commission that he

had made a number of attempts to contact the school principal before the actual meeting took place.

35.17 At that meeting the principal claimed that there was no physical or sexual abuse. He said that a parent had spoken directly to Fr Reynolds about the matter and that Fr Reynolds indicated that it would stop. An indication of how seriously the principal viewed the matter can be gleaned from his statement: *“There was gossip and innuendo - I never left him in a class on his own subsequently. I didn’t allow my daughter to be an altar girl. They were saying he was talking about ‘making love’ when the girls first spoke to me”*.

35.18 Another parent was unhappy about getting a parent to approach Fr Reynolds. He told Gardaí that in 1997 there were rumours that Fr Reynolds was interfering sexually with local children. He told Gardaí that he rang Archbishop’s House and said he wanted Fr Reynolds removed. Fr Reynolds was removed the following July. The Commission could find no evidence of this phone call in the Archdiocesan files.

#### **Interview with Fr Reynolds**

35.19 Despite the existence of a decree initiating a preliminary investigation in October 1995, Monsignor Stenson, in his capacity as delegate, did not meet Fr Reynolds until March 1996. The following note, created by Monsignor Stenson, and signed by him and by Fr Reynolds, records what happened at that meeting:

*“I informed Noel that I would let him hear the complaint and that he need not comment or say anything - that he had his rights. I read the file. Noel would agree that what I told him was a perfectly good description of what had taken place. He was approached by a parent [. . .] concerning his own daughter and he mentioned that his teenage daughter used to snub me when I visited the house. They asked what was wrong and she said that Fr Reynolds used to talk dirty.*

*Dirty talk?*

*I suppose jokes that you’d be embarrassed to tell in the company of their parents. Word games - a rhyme with sexy connotations.*

*And since [the parent] was with me I have stopped all this. For the past two years it's been like that. It was my own folly rather than maliciousness. I didn't want to frighten anyone or make them feel unsafe.*

*Something similar had occurred in other parishes but never became public.*

*If I'd been assessed before going into Clonliffe I would have been a repressed person and in need of affection. My mother died at 4. Longing for love.*

*In 1959 in Dundrum Tech I freaked giving children a class on sex instruction. I was always trying to disassociate the idea of dirt from sex. I never allowed them take the Holy Name but allowed them to talk sex.*

*Even in confession I overstressed the affection of God with children. People knew the children sat on my knee but it never gave rise to complaints.*

*A nun in East Wall made life difficult – wanted me in and out of the school in a half an hour - because of my talks on the facts of life with children.*

*I have spoken this over with some priest friends - but listening to [a priest counsellor] I believe loneliness as a child has been a huge factor. I would admit that my sexual orientation is towards children. Children would arouse me sexually.*

*Noel agreed that he had taken children for walks and outings on his lap in the car etc. On another occasion another group of children in fourth class wanted to get into the river for a swim. Noel went away – he had a towel in his car so they could dry their feet - if paddling. But he didn't want to be around so he didn't know if in fact they had or not.*

*As the youngest in the family I never took charge of situations - but I was afraid to say no. I have had nightmarish outings – rows on the beach - stopping the bus for sweets – I was lacking in discipline. My orientation to children has caused me much pain. I took on children who were disadvantaged and some very bold.*

*Noel would look back on his judgement in this area of children with a degree of suspicion. Folly he would call it.*

*I haven't noticed any 'cooling off' in the Parish by adults. I have a funny feeling that I never had an adolescence. At 63 my judgement in these areas of children has been foolish. I think I can control it. It was a habit. I think I can avoid bad behaviour anymore - imprudent - folly. I will go for any help that is required.*

*I am considering taking a sabbatical in Moone<sup>103</sup> with a possible view to entering there. . . I'm still journeying myself. But there is an element of letting me be 70 million miles away from all this...the school, allegations etc.”*

35.20 Shortly after this meeting with Monsignor Stenson, Fr Reynolds met the Archbishop. He expressed a desire to go to Moone to be a Cistercian monk. This seemed acceptable to the Archbishop.

35.21 A meeting was held with the Abbot of Moone following which he wrote to Monsignor Stenson as follows:

*“I had a visit recently from Fr. Noel Reynolds. As you may be aware he has expressed a wish to enter our Community. In the course of our conversation he told me about some incidents involving children while he was administering as P.P. in Glendalough. He had discussed the incidents with the Archbishop who told him to ask me to contact you. He seemed rather reticent about the whole matter and I didn't like to press him because it is a very sensitive area. But it would seem that there was a complaint made to Archbishops House.*

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<sup>103</sup> Moone, Co Kildare is the headquarters of the Cistercian Order.

*I would be glad therefore if you could let me know what you think I should know about these incidents.”*

35.22 In May 1996, a meeting took place between the Abbot and Monsignor Stenson. It was agreed that Fr Reynolds should be assessed by someone like Dr Patrick Walsh with a view to assisting the monks and Fr Reynolds to reach a decision. He did not join the Cistercians.

#### **Advisory panel**

35.23 In March 1997, the case was referred to the advisory panel. Monsignor Stenson, as the delegate, produced a report for the panel. In April 1997, the panel concluded that it did not consider there was any firm evidence that any incidents of child sexual abuse took place although it seemed clear that some inappropriate behaviour did happen. The panel recommended that he undertake an assessment by Dr Patrick Walsh of the Granada Institute. At this stage, over two years had elapsed and he was still in the parish of Glendalough.

#### **Dr Walsh’s assessment**

35.24 In May 1997, Dr Walsh issued a preliminary report. He noted that he could not give a definite conclusion until he had completed a more detailed assessment of Fr Reynolds’s personality and the history of the problem. He stated that Fr Reynolds was capable of maintaining a positive and appropriate ministry to adults. He was also capable of a positive and appropriate ministry to children but in a limited way. He recommended that Fr Reynolds should not be involved in non-structured or informal interactions with children in the parish or in school. He also recommended that Fr Reynolds should confine himself to the administration of the sacraments in the normal way but with the proviso that, when he heard confessions, he maintain the proper protocol and avoid physical contact and remain focused on the administration of the sacrament. He further stated that it would be inadvisable for Fr Reynolds to be involved in teaching and that he should not be involved in matters dealing with sexuality. Overall, Dr Walsh concluded that Fr Reynolds had shown *“considerable confusion in his relationships with children. He has confused his own needs as a child with their needs and consequently has failed to maintain appropriate adult-child boundaries. In addition he has used inappropriate language in his classes and interaction with children”*.

35.25 Dr Walsh recommended that a priest support person be put in place for him. This was not done until around July 1998.

### **National Rehabilitation Hospital**

35.26 Despite this assessment, Fr Reynolds was appointed by Archbishop Connell as chaplain to the National Rehabilitation Hospital, Rochestown Ave, Dun Laoghaire in July 1997. Granada was not informed of this appointment. Bishop O'Mahony told the Commission that he was the liaison bishop for hospital chaplains. He called to the hospital as a result of concerns raised by the director of nursing about Fr Reynolds's physical health. He told the Commission that it was during this visit that he became aware that Fr Reynolds might have a problem with child sexual abuse. He arranged an appointment for Fr Reynolds with Dr Walsh of Granada. Bishop O'Mahony explained to the Commission that, at that time, he was not aware that Fr Reynolds had already been assessed by Dr Walsh in 1997 nor was he aware of the contents of Monsignor Stenson's interview with Fr Reynolds in 1996.

35.27 The National Rehabilitation Hospital caters not only for adult patients in need of rehabilitation but it also has a children's ward and a school. The hospital authorities were not informed of Fr Reynolds's history and did not discover it until approached by a representative of the Prime Time programme *Cardinal Secrets* in 2002. The director of nursing, not surprisingly, expressed great concern both to the Archdiocese and in the media at the failure of Archbishop Connell to provide her or the hospital with full details of Fr Reynolds's background. The hospital management wrote a strong letter of complaint to Cardinal Connell. The Cardinal replied with an apology in the following terms: *"No explanation of mine could justify the fact that the National Rehabilitation Hospital was not informed of this background at the time of Fr Reynolds appointment as chaplain. I acknowledge that this was a serious error, although made without realisation of the risk involved"*.

35.28 It is difficult for the Commission to understand how, in 1997, Archbishop Connell, in view of the information he had of complaints, could not have been aware of the risk involved in such an appointment. Over the period of Fr Reynolds's time at the hospital, there were a total of 646 in-patients of whom 94 were aged 18 or younger. When it became aware of Fr



Reynolds's history, the hospital wrote to all 646 patients and established a help line. None of the calls or letters received reported issues of concern or required further action. The hospital also reported the matter to the health board and introduced improved safeguards for its young patients.

### **Further complaints**

35.29 In February 1998, the mother of one of Fr Reynolds's alleged victims spoke to the chancellor, Monsignor Dolan, indicating that her daughter had been sexually abused by a priest some 20 years previously. She did not give the name of the priest nor was she asked for it. She was told that, as her daughter was now an adult, she would have to make the complaint herself. She was also told that if the complaint passed the threshold of suspicion it would have to be reported to the Gardaí. The mother expressed herself very pessimistic about the ability of her daughter to go to Archbishop's House. The mother told Monsignor Dolan that she herself was receiving counselling and he was assured she had someone to talk to about her situation. Given that the matter was serious enough for the mother to receive counselling, the Commission finds it strange that the name of the priest was not sought. Had it been sought, Monsignor Dolan could have accessed Fr Reynolds's file and seen his admissions to Monsignor Stenson made almost two years earlier.

35.30 Bishop O'Mahony had a meeting with Dr Walsh and Fr Reynolds in May 1998. Dr Walsh wrote to Bishop O'Mahony stating that he was of the firm view that Fr Reynolds posed no threat to children. However, the recommendation of May 1997 should continue to be observed that "*Fr. Reynolds is also capable of positive and appropriate ministry to children but in a limited way*" and he repeated that he should not be involved in non-structured or informal interactions with children in the parish or in school.

35.31 At this stage Fr Reynolds was still acting as chaplain in the National Rehabilitation Hospital.

35.32 Six days after Dr Walsh wrote to Bishop O'Mahony, a social worker at a drug treatment centre contacted the chancellor, Monsignor Dolan, to tell him that a client had alleged that she had been abused by Fr Reynolds when she was nine years old. She said that she had informed Bishop Eamonn Walsh of

the matter the previous week and he had advised her to write to the Chancellor.

35.33 She said she was particularly concerned because Fr Reynolds was a chaplain at the National Rehabilitation Hospital stating: *“I regret to have to write this letter but I feel it is important that you are alerted as the person is in a Chaplaincy position”*.

35.34 It is recorded that Archbishop Connell was notified of the social worker’s allegations in late May 1998. A handwritten note indicated that Dr Patrick Walsh was sent a copy of her letter in early July 1998.

35.35 In July 1998, Archbishop Connell released Fr Reynolds from his duties as chaplain to the National Rehabilitation Hospital and nominated him as a beneficiary of the Diocesan Clerical Fund (see Chapter 8). The hospital was not informed of the reasons for Fr Reynolds’s removal and assumed it was due to his poor health. By this time, Fr Paddy Gleeson had been appointed assistant delegate and was now handling the matter on behalf of the Archdiocese.

35.36 This was notified to the social worker who had approached the Archdiocese with the complaint against Fr Reynolds. She was told that he would be living in monitored retirement pending the outcome of his case and that he would be receiving therapy from Dr Walsh.

35.37 At this stage Fr Reynolds was not living in monitored retirement. He was living unmonitored first with his sister and subsequently with his stepmother.

#### **Meeting with victim’s mother**

35.38 In November 1998, the mother who had initially contacted the Archdiocese and who now claimed that not one, but two, of her daughters had been abused by Fr Reynolds had a meeting with Fr Reynolds and his support priest. At this meeting, Fr Reynolds acknowledged that he had abused her daughters. This was confirmed by his support priest.

35.39 Following this meeting Fr Reynolds was medically examined and it was noted that, in addition to his cardiac problems, he suffered from the initial stages of diabetes and Parkinson's disease and that he should not live alone. He had been living with his sister and later moved in with his stepmother. In January 1999 a place was found for him in a nursing home.

#### **Formal complaint**

35.40 The Archdiocese held the view that no formal complaint had been made. They therefore had not reported the matter to the Gardaí. In June 1999, the social worker contacted Fr Gleeson to inform him that the two sisters had made contact with the Gardaí with regard to making a complaint about Fr Reynolds. She told him both had been interviewed but had not made statements.

35.41 Later in June 1999, Fr. Gleeson contacted the Gardaí at the sexual assault unit at Harcourt Street and informed them that the Archdiocese had received complaints of sexual abuse by Fr Reynolds while he was attached to the parish of Kilmore West in the late 1970s.

35.42 It was clear from the statements made by the two sisters to the Gardaí that the allegations were extremely serious. It was the worst case of "*serious and systematic abuse*" that the drug centre social worker had encountered.

35.43 In August 1999, the priests in all the areas where Fr Reynolds worked were contacted and brought together for a meeting to explain the situation.

35.44 A report in a newspaper in August 1999 alleged that the Gardaí had launched a major investigation into rape claims by two sisters against an elderly priest. It also alleged that the priest had used a crucifix in what was described as a sick sex assault. The priest was not named.

35.45 Later in the same month, Fr Reynolds travelled to Rome to celebrate the 40th anniversary of his ordination.

#### **A further complaint**

35.46 In October 1999, the Gardaí received a complaint from another woman alleging that she had been sexually abused by Fr Reynolds while he

was a curate in Kilmore West in the 1970s. She alleged that, as she was preparing for her communion, he sat her on his knee and put his hands into her pants and put his finger into her vagina. It was alleged that this had happened on five separate occasions prior to her making her first communion.

### **Admissions by Fr Reynolds**

35.47 Fr Reynolds was arrested in October 1999 for the offence of raping one of the two sisters referred to above between the years 1971 and 1979.

35.48 The Gardaí carried out a very thorough investigation into this case. Fr Reynolds was interviewed and he admitted widespread abuse. He claimed that he was pressurised into making a number of comprehensive statements but the Commission could find no evidence of this. During the course of his interviews with the Gardaí, Fr Reynolds admitted abusing one of the sisters when she was 11 and the other when she was six years old and putting his finger into their vaginas when they were in bed in their own home. He told the Gardaí that he was sexually attracted to young girls and that they were not the only two victims in Kilmore. He could remember about 20 girls in total; there were others in East Wall and on the island in the diocese of Tuam. He admitted inserting a crucifix into one girl's vagina and back passage. He said he had admitted to their mother that he had abused her daughters. He said he offered their mother £30,000 in compensation but that she did not accept it.

35.49 Not only did he admit the abuse of the two sisters and several others in many other parishes, but he also offered as evidence to the Gardaí, the crucifix with which he had said he had abused one of the complainants. The Gardaí did not confine their investigations to the area where the two women claimed they had been abused but they also conducted inquiries in several of the parishes where Fr Reynolds worked. A very comprehensive file was forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP). The DPP was prepared to initiate a prosecution against Fr Reynolds and gave instructions to that effect. Following representations from his solicitor about Fr Reynolds's deteriorating health, and specifically the medically verified onset on dementia, the DPP changed his mind.

35.50 The two sisters were bitterly disappointed with the outcome.

### **Other complaints**

35.51 The Gardaí became aware of another 12 complainants. While nine were prepared to make statements, the other three declined to do so. The incidents ranged from fondling of genitals to touching around the leg area, digital penetration, anal rape, attempted sexual intercourse, oral sex, actual sexual intercourse and inviting the children to fondle his penis.

35.52 In many cases the abuse continued for between two and seven years.

35.53 In total, nine females and six males claim they were abused by Fr Reynolds. They were aged between six years and 11 years at the time of the abuse. Of course, he has admitted to many more cases of abuse, at least 20 in Kilmore alone.

### **Health board**

35.54 A note on the health board file states that the matter was referred to them in February 2001. A second note in November 2002 states that *“we had decided to follow up on safety issues in relation to the above. I now understand the man is deceased, so current living arrangements need no further follow up”*.

35.55 Fr Reynolds died in April 2002.

### **The Commission’s assessment**

#### *Archdiocese*

35.56 This case was extremely badly handled by the Archdiocese. Numerous indications of serious abuse and of admissions by Fr Reynolds were ignored. The suspicions about Fr Reynolds surfaced during his time in Glendalough in 1994. Despite the fact that the parents had no desire to go to the Gardaí or to the health board, and wished the Church to deal with the matter, it was March 1996 before any interview with Fr Reynolds was conducted. He admitted to the complaints. He stated that something similar

happened in other parishes. No proper investigation was conducted into his activities in other parishes. Despite this admission he was allowed to remain on as parish priest in Glendalough until July 1997. The Commission accepts that Monsignor Stenson only became aware of the complaints in October 1995.

35.57 In the interview with Monsignor Stenson in March 1996, Fr Reynolds also admitted that his sexual orientation was towards children. A record of this interview is signed by Fr Reynolds. Again, despite this, he was given an appointment in the National Rehabilitation Hospital. This appointment gave him access to young children. Subsequently, Bishop O'Mahony became aware that Fr Reynolds may have a problem with child sexual abuse but he does not seem to have mentioned this to anyone else in the Archdiocese or, indeed, to the hospital. This, the Commission believes, represents a major breakdown in communications among those in overall charge of the Archdiocese.

35.58 When the mother of two of Fr Reynolds' complainants reported to the chancellor, in February 1998, that her daughter had been sexually abused by a priest 20 years previously she was told that, because her daughter was an adult she would have to make the complaint herself. The Commission recognises that she did not name the priest nor was she asked for his name. She explained that her daughter was unlikely to go to the Church authorities to complain.

35.59 When the social worker reported her fears that a priest whom she claimed may have sexually abused one of her clients some 20 years previously was currently working in a situation where he had access to children, this also was ignored. She did name Fr Reynolds.

35.60 It seems to the Commission that a somewhat extraordinary approach was adopted towards Fr Reynolds. The situation was that, in 1994, the Church authorities had received information about inappropriate behaviour by a priest in Glendalough. They themselves had set up a preliminary investigation and discovered that the priest in question had admitted a sexual orientation towards children and to inappropriate behaviour in other parishes. Yet, when an allegation was received from the social worker who specifically

named the priest as having allegedly abused the woman, the priest was allowed to remain in the hospital for a further seven weeks.

35.61 There is no evidence that Bishop O Mahony related the contents of his conversation with Fr Reynolds to the hospital management. When the management of the hospital discovered in 2002 that a child sexual abuser, unknown to them, had been assigned to them as chaplain, they took all appropriate steps to ensure that their patients were informed and facilitated should they have any complaints. Furthermore, it is commendable that they put improved structures and appointment procedures in place to protect children.

35.62 It seems to the Commission that, had the two women themselves not complained to the Gardaí, the Archdiocese would have been quite happy to ignore the fact that any abuse had taken place.

#### *The Gardaí*

35.63 The Gardaí carried out a very thorough investigation into this case as described above.

#### *Health board*

35.64 There was no significant involvement by the health board in this case because the matter was not referred to it until February 2001 by which time the priest was living in a retirement home and died shortly thereafter.