

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF SAFEGUARDING

The scandals involving abuse in the Catholic Church are only too well known. As a result, rigorous safeguarding procedures have to be in place in every parish. There are staff working at this at the diocesan level, at the national level of the Church in Scotland, as well as at parish level. Volunteers working with children and vulnerable adults have to be cleared through the PVG scheme. This is indeed a legal requirement with which the Church must comply.

Perhaps for most parish priests, ensuring that the right safeguarding procedures are in place is something of an administrative chore. It is like making sure that fire risk and other assessments have been done. It may seem to some that this is done to satisfy insurance requirements rather than to promote the good of the people. Possibly for this reason there may be tendency for some clergy to avoid as far as possible doing anything that involves more “hassle” and which might occasion the risk of something going wrong. There have been anecdotal instances of this happening.

In addition, the demoralising effects of past cases of abuse have sapped the confidence of priests and people. The McLellan Report remarks on this:

Because confidence is low within the Church, as well as public confidence being low, there is an increasing likelihood that, for fear of doing wrong, priests and parishes will do nothing. Lack of confidence means that good things are not done in case mistakes are made in the process. It is not that the fear is of further abuse. It is that the confidence and courage are no longer there to attempt new and courageous things. So parish priests sometimes feel the Church is not being the force for good that should be.¹

One might add that, as long as safeguarding seems like an administrative chore, then the energy for “new and courageous things” will also be sapped.

But of course safeguarding has to be more than that. It has to be central to the pastoral care of the parish because it is about protecting vulnerable human beings. One way, and perhaps this is the only way, we can take on a mind-set that sees safeguarding as being so central is if it is also central to our faith and theology. It is not just putting in place that which is required of us by the law of the land. Indeed, it is not just about what we do or fail to do. It is about what we think and believe and must inform what we do. Moreover, theology helps us to unify our experience and resist the temptation to compartmentalise it. Hence, the McLellan Report stresses the importance of developing “a clear and simple theology of

¹ *The McLellan Commission: A review of the current safeguarding policies, procedures and practice within the Catholic Church in Scotland* ((2015), 2.62, here after referred to as McLellan.

safeguarding, which emphasises that the protection of the weak is not merely a Christian duty but a divine privilege.”² Only when we have developed this theology will we be able to hear that oft repeated phrase in Scripture: “do not be afraid.” Maybe we will also be able to look at fire and other risk assessments in the same light. For surely that is about protecting vulnerable human beings. The words “simple and clear” might be noted here. So often theology can be written in dense prose that is far from being clear and simple.

Of course I am not a “card carrying” theologian. But I am a parish priest who has read some theology and who preaches daily on Scripture. Before becoming a priest, I was an academic historian. Since becoming a priest I have taught philosophy in a seminary. My qualifications for writing this material are fairly lowly; so what I write must be clear and simple!

In practice safeguarding is above all about protecting children and vulnerable adults. But it is wider than that and a theological understanding of safeguarding can help us to see that. In the words of McLellan: “It needs to be recognised that anyone can be at risk. In certain situations, confronted with certain behaviour, even the strongest and most resilient can be at risk.”³ One might say that this view comes from a theology of creation in which God creates human beings as being vulnerable. We are all potentially vulnerable because that is simply how we are.

Further we put in place adequate safeguarding policies and procedures, not simply because we have to according to the law of the land, but because it is *right* to do so. Moral theology should be able to say something about safeguarding. The law provides only minimum requirements. That is never enough for us. Love requires us to go further. Again this approach can throw light on issues that might seem to be purely administrative and secular. For example, the law does not require me to install emergency lighting in my church. But, in the event of a power cut combined with the immediate need to evacuate the church, people might well get hurt. So it becomes right for me to install emergency lighting.

There are many different kinds of theology and all of them should say something about safeguarding. There are the examples from the theology of creation and moral theology referred to in the preceding paragraph. Christology must be central to the theology of safeguarding – Jesus was once a child who needed protecting and he speaks very directly about children - together with ecclesiology, because the vulnerable should always find a home in the Church and “the basis and meaning of the Church is a person...Jesus Christ.”⁴ There are obvious

² *Ibid.*, p.x

³ *Ibid.* 3.18.

⁴ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London, 1977 edition), p. 15.

connections between Mariology, for Mary gives protection to the weak. One fruitful avenue might be the theology of angels – one thinks of those guardian angels (note the Lord’s remarks below), though this can lead us into dark areas. For where are the guardian angels when children are being abused? Maybe they do not protect us from being damaged; but maybe they do protect our souls. No matter how much people are abused, no-one has the power to destroy their souls. Somehow this message must be transmitted to people. Finally, safeguarding would find a place in ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue where particular religious minorities experience oppression and discrimination. But where does our theology of safeguarding begin?

It must begin with Jesus and his words about children. When people brought children to him for him to bless them, the disciples tried to turn them away. But Jesus says: “let the children come to me and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”⁵ *Do not hinder them*. How can children learn about the love of God if they have been abused? In the words of McLellan:

No good theology of safeguarding will be content with platitudes about the sweetness of children. A good theology of safeguarding will recognise the depth of hurt and damage, the depth of wrong, which abuse regularly causes. It will not avoid the deepest questions of evil and the God of love and it will proclaim the justice of God for those who cry out for justice and against those who seek to flee from justice.⁶

On another occasion, Jesus declares: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”⁷ The “little ones” referred to here possibly refer to all those who have faith – all of us are vulnerable when it comes to faith! This is about causing anyone to stumble in their faith and is particularly applicable to children who are growing in their faith. And “their angels always behold the face of my father who is in heaven...so it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”⁸ Surely, these words speak directly to those who have been abused. Yes, you have been abused. And yes, you are still alive. Yes, you have been damaged. And yes your spirit is still there; for no-one can take away your dignity as a child of God and nothing can separate you from the love

⁵ Matt. 19:13. Cf Mark 10:13-14; Luke 18:15.

⁶ 3.82

⁷ Mark 9:42. Cf Matt. 18:6; Luke 17:1, McLellan, 2.10

⁸ Matt.18:10, 14.

of God revealed in Jesus Christ.⁹ The Lord will guard your soul.¹⁰ The Christ in the abused is protected and kept safe as Mary and Joseph kept safe their son as they fled into Egypt to escape from Herod.¹¹

When the disciples were concerned about who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, the Lord says: “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” This is not about becoming childish, but rather recovering the spontaneity and sense of wonder of a small child. Jesus also says: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”¹² Jesus praises his Father for revealing the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to babies.¹³ So it is not simply a case of adults leading children to God. Rather children can lead adults to God. Perhaps abused children have a special part in that mission. In reaching out to the abused, the Church comes closer to Christ. It may seem strange that those who feel their faith has been shattered by the experience of abuse, and who would never darken the doors of any church, are closer to God than anyone and can bring others to God. That is how God exalts those who have been cast down. Of course I do not believe that the expression of such sentiments will bring people “back to the Church.” But I hope that somehow the Church will go to them.

As he identifies himself with children, so he identifies himself with all those who are vulnerable – those who hunger and thirst, sick, in prison, without clothes, those who are foreigners or refugees – that is where he is in the world and where he comes to meet us.¹⁴

One of the great insights of the Second Vatican Council is that Jesus not only reveals God to human beings, but also reveals authentic human nature. In him we see what is to be human:

In reality, it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man becomes clear. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.¹⁵

⁹ Romans 8:38-9.

¹⁰ Cf Psalm 91.

¹¹ Matt. 2:13-15.

¹² Matt. 18:1-5. Cf Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-8.

¹³ Matt. 11:25-27. Cf Luke 10:21-22.

¹⁴ Matt. 25:31-46.

¹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22, translated by Austen Flannery, Vatican Council 11: *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin 1975), p. 922.

This Christian humanism was developed by Pope St John Paul II in his early encyclicals, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) and *Salvifici Doloris* (1984).

So what do we see in Christ? Only two images of the Lord come from our Christian tradition: that of a babe in arms and a man dying on a cross – images of human vulnerability. That’s who we are: vulnerable human beings who are born and who need protection during the childhood years, and who eventually die. St Clare of Assisi saw in the life and death of Christ a mirror in which we can see ourselves.¹⁶

So safeguarding is safeguarding Christ – safeguarding his word – and enabling the world to believe in him. So where is the Church in this? In his first encyclical letter, Pope Benedict XVI, wrote, concerning the Church’s charitable activity: “today, as in the past, the Church as God’s family must be a place where help is given and received, and at the same time, a place where people are also prepared to serve those outside her confines who are in need of help.”¹⁷ So many of the abused are outside the confines of the Church and they need our help. And maybe we also need them.

The Roman Catholic Church is undoubtedly a powerful institution. In the past it was even more powerful than it is now. It competed for power among the kingdoms of this world and indeed became one of the kingdoms of this world. It still has many of the trappings of worldly power. The Pope is an absolute monarch with a court, though Pope Francis is working on that one. Bishops and clergy are powerful authority figures who are rarely challenged on the way they use their power. They are answerable only to a higher power. It is in this context that abuse has happened; for ultimately all abuse is an abuse of power. Priests abused children because they thought they could get away with it and would never be brought to account. Because of the abuse scandals, the Church has lost a lot of its prestige and indeed a lot of its power. That is no bad thing.

Of course the Church is not exclusively an institution. Long ago, in developing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote of other “models” of the Church.¹⁸ And forty years ago, Leonardo Boff wrote that:

When we speak of the Church as institution, we do not mean the community of believers who give witness in the world to the presence of

¹⁶ Letter to St Agnes of Prague, *The Divine Office. The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite*, III, pp. 183-184*.

¹⁷ *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 32.

¹⁸ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in all its Aspects* (Dublin, 1974)

the risen Christ. We refer to the organization of this community with its hierarchy, dogmas, rites, canons and traditions.

Boff argued that the Church, like all human institutions, has tended to succumb to the temptations of becoming “a system of power and repression over creativity and criticism...power became a powerful temptation for domination and a substitution for God and Jesus Christ.” As a result, there is “a deep chasm between the Church that thinks, speaks, and yet does not act, and that Church which does not dare to think, cannot speak and yet acts.”¹⁹ One can see the same chasm in the Church today. It was one of the fault lines in the Synod of Bishops in 2014 and 2015. Pope Francis has adverted to this issue in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he famously declares: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty. Because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”²⁰ Certainly the Pope wants to see the Church as being less clerical and more connected with the lives of ordinary people, especially the poor.

Dulles observed that the consequences of “institutionalism” were clericalism, juridicism (that is authority modelled on the pattern of that of the secular state), and triumphalism.²¹ A modern writer sees the scandals arising from sex abuse in the Church as deriving from a clerical culture.²² It is surely that an exclusive preoccupation with the Church as an institution that must be protected at all costs has led to a “culture of secrecy” in the Church that led to abuse being hidden for many years.²³ There is still this “culture of secrecy” in many of the transactions of the institutional Church and one wonders whether the secrecy is always necessary. Why, for example, is the choice of bishops shrouded in secrecy? The problem with secrecy is that there are inevitably leaks. Eventually we get to know what happened in papal conclaves; and there have been the notorious instances of “Vatileaks” and in 2015 the documents leaked by two officials in the Curia. A “culture of secrecy” actually does not work.

The mission of the Church in all its aspects is to continue that of Christ and to be his presence in the world. Its purpose is to protect the vulnerable and to preach the good news to the poor - the two things go together. Its clergy are there to serve its people, not to dominate or control them, and they should be seen to be doing that. Nor are the clergy there to preserve the institution at all costs or promote the

¹⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (London, 1985), pp. 48-49.

²⁰ No. 49.

²¹ Op.cit. pp. 35-36

²² George B. Wilson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* (Collegeville, 2008).

²³ McLellan, 2.26

glory of the institution rather than the glory of God. Certainly there are procedures in the Church which must be confidential. This is different from a culture of secrecy. A helpful example is the process of a spiritual direction. Spiritual direction happens in a private conversation between the director and the directed, which must be confidential. At the same time, if someone comes unexpectedly into the room, they should not see anything untoward or clandestine. Confidential processes in the Church must be like that.

The Church must always have an institutional side. It must have recognised ministers, creeds, prescribed forms of worships, organisation and so forth. It could not perform its mission without some institutional features.²⁴ This means that individuals and groups in the Church will have power. But if this power is exercised in secret, then it is always potentially dangerous. Only by making those in power accountable can the danger be obviated.

A theology of safeguarding has led to a consideration of how the institutional Church has acted in the past and the kind of changes that we must now move towards. Clergy must become more accountable for the decisions that they take. There must be move away from the kind of clerical culture to which we have become accustomed. Pope Francis has already signalled this kind of direction in his Apostolic Exhortation and numerous addresses and homilies. When all is said and done, a theology of safeguarding is about social justice and none of us are exempt from a concern with that.²⁵ The problem is of course that so many of us, clergy and lay people, have been complicit in creating that culture.²⁶ This means that that changes we need to see in the Church are not simply the responsibility of someone else – all of us are responsible. We all need a change of heart – we all need to repent.

²⁴ Dulles, p. 32

²⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 201.

²⁶ Wilson, *Clericalism*, pp. 101-102.