

BOOK REVIEWS

Betrayal: The crisis in the Catholic Church The Investigative Staff of the *Boston Globe* Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 2002

On March 18, 2003, I typed 'Priests and Abuse' into Lexis Nexis™ to retrieve articles from major Australian newspapers. The search engine located 259 hits in the last 12 months, major stories from the *Australian*, the *Advertiser* and even the *Australian Financial Review*. By focusing on particular newspapers, it is possible to retrieve even more: 47 were retrieved from the *Courier Mail*, for example.

Typing in 'priests and abuse' and selecting the *Boston Globe* during the last 12 months created a problem: 'This search has been interrupted because it will return more than 1,000 documents. Please edit your search and try again.' (<http://web.lexis-nexis>) Some problems are too big even for the computer and the internet.

Betrayal: The crisis in the Catholic Church is written by the investigative reporters of *The Boston Globe*. Boston is described in the book as 'the quintessential American Catholic city' (2002:8), but, of course, the scandal (and I use the word advisedly) of the Catholic Church's responses to child sexual abuse has a broader relevance:

Betrayal is the story of a large number of Catholic priests who abused both the trust given them and the children in their care. It is the story of the bishops and cardinals who hired, promoted, protected and thanked those priests, despite overwhelming evidence of their abusive behaviour (2002:3).

The book is in many ways a case study of how children and other victims were silenced, and how far the Church's hierarchy, including Cardinal Law (described in the book as 'the most influential American Catholic prelate with the Vatican' (2002:3)), was prepared to go to hide appalling sins and terrible crimes:

... Cardinal Law and his top aides were repeatedly warned about dangerous priests, but continued to put these sexual abusers in positions to attack children (2002:6).

The book starts with the case of Father Geoghan and his sexual assault in 1974 on thirteen-year-old Frank Leary. Leary was the fifth of six children being raised by his mother. The family was subsisting on welfare. Geoghan specialised in grooming and abusing the most vulnerable, the least protected, those in greatest need. Leary was asked to recite the familiar prayers of the Catholic faith, 'Hail Mary'

and 'Our Father', while Geoghan performed oral sex on him. According to Leary, the assault was interrupted by another priest with the words: 'Jack, we told you not to do this up here!' (2002:13).

Since the mid-1990's, more than 130 people have come forward with horrific childhood tales about how former priest John J. Geoghan allegedly fondled or raped them during a three-decade spree through a half-dozen Greater Boston parishes ... one was just 4 years old (2002: ix-x).

Betrayal starts with Geoghan not because of the large number of his victims, but because of 'the delicate and deceptive way the Church handled his sins.' The *Boston Globe* obtained the documents that illustrate the delicacy and the deception. Some of them are provided in a chilling Appendix to the book. There is the hand-written note (2 November, 1980) from Geoghan in reply to Cardinal Medeiros's extension of his sick leave, in which he states he is receiving excellent medical care (2002:207). His one year of sick leave was arranged when it was discovered that he was regularly molesting seven boys. At the end of the sick leave, he was moved to a fifth parish, St. Brendan's in Boston.

There is the four-page letter from Margaret Gallant (1982) eloquently complaining that the repeated assaults on boys have been ignored. She states that she is insulted by the suggestion that she remains silent to protect the victims. The letter passionately identified everyone's responsibility in allowing Geoghan to move from parish to parish, and concludes with a last desperate plea: 'May Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit have mercy on all of us' (2002:210-215). Contrast this with the psychiatrist's letter to the Bishop: six lines tersely proclaiming that Geoghan is 'now able to resume his priestly duties' (2002:208). Contrast it also to Cardinal Medeiros's reply speaking of the 'hardship' caused to several boys, but stressing that 'sinners indeed can be forgiven' (2002:16).

In 1984, another doctor writes that Geoghan's ministry was terminated 'due to a rather unfortunate traumatic experience' at St Brendan's (traumatic to many as Geoghan was once again sexually assaulting boys). After a 'brief, but beneficial respite' Geoghan is described as having 'adjusted remarkably well' and is 'now able to resume full pastoral

activities' (2002:218). It is interesting to note that neither of the doctors could be said to be independent (in spite of Church claims as late as 2001 that they were) and neither had any expertise in sexually deviant behaviour (2002:50-51). One had been subject to a lawsuit for sexual molestation. The other described Geoghan as 'a longtime friend and patient' (2002:218).¹

In a powerful mixture of excellent investigative journalism and discovered documents, this book condemns the senior members of the Catholic Church in their own words, the stories of the victims, and the almost palpable outrage of the journalists themselves.

There is the story of the Rev. Paul R. Shanley:

... a sexual predator, a skilled manipulator who used his power and authority to prey on those who came to him for guidance and support. Therapy sessions became the settings for molestation and rape (2002:66).

The evidence is clear that Shanley's predatory and abusive behaviour was apparent in the late 1960s. Thirty-five years and many, many victims later, Shanley finally came to police attention. Over 1600 pages of secret church papers gave some indication of the scale of his offences. He publicly argued that 'no sexual act caused 'psychic' damage to children, including incest and bestiality' (2002:67). In arguments reminiscent of events in Australia (Goddard, 2002), he also argued that the child is often the 'seducer' in adult-child sex (2002:67). In spite of these public affirmations of his views, in spite of evidence that he contracted a sexually-transmitted disease, in spite of giving instructions to teenagers on how to inject drugs, and, in spite of settlement after settlement for complaints including anal rape, Shanley retired with a glowing tribute:

Without doubt over all these years of generous and zealous care, the lives and hearts of many people have been touched by your sharing of the Lord's Spirit. You are truly appreciated for all that you have done (2002:69).

It comes as no surprise to learn that Cardinal Law's response to charges that Shanley had molested a six-year-old was that the boy and his parents had contributed to the abuse by their own negligence (2002:162-163).

This is a shocking book (again I use the phrase deliberately). It tells of a Church where senior clergy claimed that priests were immune from civil and criminal charges for child molestation and rape. It tells of a Church that consulted spin-doctors and lawyers rather than its communal conscience. It tells of their strenuous efforts to protect reputations and

suppress the truth, rather than protect children and suppress predatory priests.

The saddest part of the story told by the investigative journalists of the *Boston Globe* is that much of this will be familiar to many people in Australia and around the world. In spite of repeated claims that there is no single entity of the Catholic Church, the responses of the Catholic 'churches' have been remarkably similar. The church hierarchy allowed, even encouraged, serial offenders to continue working. The story is the same in Australia, Latin America and Europe.

As I have noted elsewhere (see, for example, Goddard 2002), there is a ghastly symmetry in this corruption. Child molesters and rapists require privacy, power and secrecy. But even privacy, power and secrecy are insufficient for the repeat offender in the church. In order to maintain his supply of children and in order to continue to create the opportunities to assault them, the priest perpetrator needs to subvert the host organisation. The responses of the Catholic Church provide a classic case study in organisational subjugation. Over and over again, the Church made every effort to give the rapists and molesters another chance -- another chance to rape and molest. The book dismantles a corrupt church, chapter by chapter -- 'The Predators'; 'Cover-up'; 'The Victims'; 'Explosion'; and 'The Decline of Deference'.

Betrayal is the work of eight investigative reporters. It is the *Boston Globe* writ large. As such it has the air of a story still being written. On March 20, 2003, it was announced that this investigation into the Catholic Church had won a top investigative journalists' award (*Boston Globe*, 20 March 2003). It should be read by every member of every hierarchy of every organisation with any responsibility for children. Many organisations have failed to respond appropriately to child abuse. As the book notes, however, no other denomination has had such a problem on such a scale or has been as damaged as the Catholic Church. There will be some, inside the Catholic Church and outside, who will be grateful that there is no newspaper in Australia that would, or could, allocate eight journalists to such a story. Sadly, there will be children who will suffer because of the lack of depth of Australian reporting.

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REFERENCES

Goddard, C. (2002) 'Church needs the Law of Man'. *The Age*, 6 June, p.15.

¹ It was reported in the Daily Telegraph (Sydney) on 27 August 2003 that Father Geoghan was murdered in prison while serving a ten year sentence for the assault of a ten-year-old boy.