

The Universe – Comment –

Don't hesitate: act on abuse

In the past decade or so an uncomfortable truth has become apparent. Child abuse has been uncovered in organisations and establishments across these islands: in schools and children's homes, in football academies and at the BBC – and in religious institutions, including the Catholic Church.

Back in 2015 the issue of child sex abuse in the Catholic Church was brought to the forefront with the release of *Spotlight*. The movie was based on *The Boston Globe's* 'Spotlight' team, and, in particular, their uncovering of the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, which led to the discovery of an international scandal within the Church.

The uncovering led to the revelation of horrific cover-ups, involving clerics and members of religious orders who had abused minors and were then protected by Church leaders and others.

The appalling cover-ups, which some claimed were done to protect the Church's good name rather than the perpetrators, allowed child abusers to roam the country under the guise of a trustworthy, honest, dependable and reliable member of society.

However, these individuals were far from that – they were monsters... wolves in sheep's clothing.

Rather than using their position to offer support, help, aid and nourishment to those in need, and follow the teachings of Christ, they abused the vulnerable, thus making them even more vulnerable to the point where some victims felt so trapped they saw no other option but to commit suicide.

The Bible states: 'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but educate them with the discipline and correction of the Lord' (Eph 6:4).

As well as being an abhorrent evil, child abuse leads victims to anger and can have many detrimental effects, such as mental health issues.

A recent report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests that victims of child abuse are actually more likely to experience further suffering and abuse in their adult lives, so even for those who have managed to break free from their initial abuser, they may never escape the abuse, whether it be through flashbacks or another perpetrator targeting them.

However, raising concerns about a child who may be suffering abuse may prevent long-term harm and will hopefully bring the perpetrators to justice.

But those who don't speak up, worrying that it will soil the good name of the Church, should be more concerned about the victim and what the Lord would want.

Would Our Lord want his Church being used by child abusers to both conceal their vile crimes and give them opportunities to prey on more victims?

Of course not – using the Church in such a way is both an abuse of the Church itself and of God's teachings.

It is of the utmost importance that anyone reports any concerns of any form of abuse, wherever it is taking place, either at home, in school, in the Church or elsewhere.

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A doctor takes the hand of a young man to perform an HIV quick test at a clinic. New testing, screening and anti-viral drugs have dramatically improved life chances for HIV sufferers
Photo: Britta Pedersen/Dpa



HIV has not gone away – neither should the Catholic response

SOCIAL COMMENT

Jim McManus



On 11th October – Wednesday next week – the Archbishop of Southwark, his Anglican counterpart and Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, former Master of the Dominicans, will do something very special. They will launch, in a room full of professionals, community activists and people living with HIV, a series of videos on HIV and coping, and a new website.

'What's so special about that?', I hear you ask. Well, the videos are funded by an agency of Government – Public Health England. It was co-ordinated and led by Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support. And they won the funding through a competitive process, while talking explicitly about faith.

The videos will, at a time when it feels like faith is sometimes an unwelcome word in the public sector, focus on how people of faith make sense of preventing HIV, living with it, and supporting those affected by it. That's pretty special. Public Health England, CAPS, Kip Loades – a film maker – Vicki Morris, the project manager, and a host of people with and affected by HIV deserve high praise for the tool they are about to put into our hands.

I have been privileged – both as a Catholic and a public health professional – to be for both Public Health England and CAPS, the sponsor and supporter of this project. It's something I will never forget.

Why all this excitement, you may well ask? HIV is now a manageable condition and if you get diagnosed and treated with HIV early, your life expectancy is more or less the same as if you didn't have it. Moreover, treatment can suppress the virus to the point where it's considered undetectable in the bloodstream, and for people who are undetectable it is almost impossible to pass the virus sexually to their partners. So, why bother?

Well, several reasons. Over 101,000 people in the UK have HIV. And around 6,000 new diagnoses happen every year. Some areas have many more people than other areas. But most parishes in

the UK will encounter someone with HIV, or have people close to someone with HIV. In some churches you may see a discreet red ribbon poster, a sign to people with HIV and their loved ones that they are welcome. We shouldn't need them. But we do.

Another major issue is that while HIV might be manageable, it's definitely no walk in the park. Stigma, mental health issues, problems with side effects from medications (liver function, bone density, kidney issues and more) the unpredictability of a long-term condition and the fact people with HIV living long term with it are at heightened risk of some cancers, heart disease and other diseases, as well as showing signs of long-term cognitive problems, mean what was once an early death has been replaced by a need to find strategies to live and cope long term.

If that's not enough there are still too many people – especially women – being diagnosed very late, when the virus has done enough damage to the body to mean the risk of death is much closer and life expectancy is significantly reduced. Even though with treatment they can regain some health, they still have ongoing health issues worse than if they had been diagnosed early.

The successes of longevity and helping people keep the virus suppressed in their blood bring many more psychosocial challenges – coping, relationships, inclusion, stigma. I could go on. HIV continues to present challenges to people, and because of that, it continues to present challenges to our churches. And that's where this resource comes in. People with and affected by HIV are still on many margins, hence the need for this project.

The new resource of films and the website *Positive Faith* will have people living with and affected by HIV, on film,

and others, discussing HIV and how it interacts with their faith. That's important in my book in and of itself. In fact, if you think back 20 years, someone with HIV showing their face on a video would have been almost unthinkable. How far we've come! And how far we have to go.

But what is even more important in my book is the fact that bits of the health world are re-learning what people of faith never forgot – that we understand our health and health behaviours, including coping with challenges, through and with our faith. And here we have a video resource doing just that. There will be a website, with reflection resources, and other materials and tools. For people of faith, their faith is intimately linked to their health and their lives. There is ample scientific research on that.

There is also ample research that being who we are, and being valued for that, is crucial to full humanity. So being able to understand where HIV affects us, whether living with it, being in the family or friendship circle of someone living with it, or seeking to remain HIV negative, must include the faith dimension for people of faith.

For those of us of faith we have an aching need for God at our core as the Psalm says, 'like the deer pants for running streams', and our public services and faith communities insisting we should compartmentalise bits of that does nothing less than disintegrate us, and dehumanise us.

Those who say 'leave your faith at the door of this hospital' but claim to value diversity and personalisation, or 'leave your HIV at the door of the Church' but claim to welcome all, radically undermine the very values they purport to affirm and the scientific evidence behind it; the whole person is called to health,

not just the bits we feel we can deal with.

A further reason is that this project is a tool to inclusion in our churches of people with and affected by HIV. For us, that must start from encounter with God and encounter with our affected neighbours because of love for God and for them. The Churches have been patchy at that.

Finally, the nature of HIV has much to teach us about health. People with HIV, like those with cancer or many conditions, play a hugely important role for the Church. Living with HIV is about adjustment to a changing reality of health experience and expectation, and says much about what we can be despite a condition which remains life-threatening, as well being manageable. Now, isn't that a rich model to reshape our Christian understanding of health in this life with?

This video expresses both the joys and rejoicing, the coping, crying to the Lord, the wilderness as well as places of inclusion, and the expectation of God's people with and affected by HIV. The task for the institutions of all our Churches now is to proclaim God is with them, with us, and in doing so, include, love and learn from each other.

I am constantly moved to have been the sponsor for this project. It's been amazing to see Church and health agencies work together so very constructively, with mutual respect. It's been a privilege to see the witness of so many with and affected by HIV. It's been an opportunity for me personally to reaffirm that my faith and my professional public health life can interact positively.

This will be a powerful resource. I commend it to you.

Positive Faith will be available free online at www.positivefaith.net from November 2017 – produced by Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support, with Kip Loades film maker. For more on Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support visit: www.caps-uk.org.

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