

LEARNING
RESOURCE

STOLEN LIVES



It's our church and it's up to us:

Taking action to end clerical abuse of power and cover up

**root &
branch**



reform
is needed
in our Catholic church!

INTRODUCTION

Root & Branch forum for reform in the Catholic Church

Reclaiming Stolen Lives

It's our church and it's up to us!

Breaking the silence and secrecy about clerical abuse and cover-up

This guide is for all of us who want to challenge clerical power abuse in the catholic church and break the silence that surrounds it. It begins with listening to the voices of survivors of clerical sexual abuse and offers a number of alternative ways that we might take action to demand change.

Survivors of clerical power abuse in all its forms, sexual, emotional, physical, financial, spiritual and abuse of conscience, must be listened to. Survivors are people of all sexualities, of all races, male and female, lay and ordained. Their pain and suffering have been caused by the church, but survivors have been generous and brave to develop this guide.

We must live the change that we want to see, so we strive to underpin our work with the values of co-production that are - mutual respect, equality of input, equality of resources, support for vulnerable people, listening to and learning from those who are different, transparency and authenticity of voice. Penelope Middelboe's article in Pastoral Review, June 2022, explains our approach. <https://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/stolen-lives>



How can those of us who remain in, but who might feel estranged from the official Catholic Church, make change happen? We're all different, so we need to think about a range of options. People can then position themselves in the places that they feel called to act.



These guidelines complement our learning resource 'Stolen Lives: telling the stories that need to be told' which offers a survivor-based approach to understanding clerical sexual violence and other abuses of power within the Catholic Church. Free for all here: <https://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/stolen-lives>



If time is short, [click here >>>](#) to go straight to the panel discussion 'What can I do?'

Scroll down until you see this:



Send us your feedback

We have much to learn from each other. We need to pray and act in solidarity with each other and with abuse victims and survivors. We hope that you will share your stories of taking action. Tell us about your successes or how your efforts were blocked or unsuccessful. We will share these on our website. Do let us know if you wish to remain anonymous. Tell us also about how, in the process of challenging the abuse of power, you are finding yourselves changed in the process. To be silenced adds further abuse, and so to share your stories can be a liberating experience.

Contact us: hello@rootandbranchsynod.org

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Taking Action: Suggestions and options for actions that you might take. This is not comprehensive and we welcome additional suggestions from our readers.

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Root & Branch's prayer of dissent
The Merton prayer
R & B template to help set up a small DIY group

“Esse est Percipi” (To exist is to be recognized), dedicated to the memory of all victims of sexual abuse committed within the Church.

The statue of a child's dress, donated by the victims and their relatives, was unveiled in the middle of a ceremony at the Basilica of Koekelberg, the Belgian National Basilica to the Sacred Heart.

Like the sculptures in Antwerp and Bruges, this work symbolises wounded childhood and its fragility. More than 150 people took part in this inauguration, among them many representatives of the Church.



PART ONE

Basing our actions on the experiences of victims and survivors of clerical abuse

Always remember that in any gathering there may be victims, survivors and perpetrators present.

Whatever you decide, we suggest that you offer support to victims and survivors. One of the best ways that you can do this is through sharing **their stories, with permission**, or using published material, where victims have been bullied and further damaged when reporting their abuse to church authorities.

For every single victim of power abuse in the church there will also be many ‘secondary victims’, family, friends, other lay people, non-abusing priests or religious and ultimately the whole church. We might wish to listen to their stories too.

Remember that there is no true forgiveness without justice.

Practise listening

One of the most precious gifts we can offer someone is just to listen. Take care when offering advice, never assuming, ask survivors how they want to be described, what do they want, what are their priorities? This could be free access to independent therapy and pastoral support, mandatory reporting to secular authorities.

The Anglican diocese of Newcastle’s project, ‘If I Told You, What Would You Do?’ suggests seven questions that people affected by abuse might ask us:

- Would you make me feel safe?
- Would you show me that I can trust you?
- Would you help me find others who understand and can offer me support?
- Would you walk with me at my pace?
- Would you encourage me to use my voice?
- Would you respect my choices?
- Would you value who I am right now?

<https://www.newcastle.anglican.org/safeguarding/if-i-told-you-what-would-you-do/>

Be on the lookout for ‘the cult of appearance’. Parishes and diocese may have lots of processes in place. Things might look good. But, as they say in business, ‘culture eats process for breakfast’. If the culture in the Church is one where power is abused, then the Church will fail in its mission. People call this an existential crisis. Many believe that is where the Church is today.

Right Reverend Ruth Bushyager, Bishop of Horsham comments:

“

“Some churches present that everything is wonderful, we are here to praise and be joyful, we are all blessed and God answers our prayers. Healthy churches need to also own brokenness, failure, sin and disappointment. This needs to come from church leadership who are secure enough to be appropriately honest, humble and vulnerable. So the culture is then “real” and not closed, defensive or false. There is too much avoidance of the “bad” in churches that want to be happy, positive, joyful, 'successful' places, which leads to a culture where disclosures are less likely”.

www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual/responding-victims-and-survivors-abuse/section-1-responding-well

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Listening to survivors of sexual violence and other forms of clerical power abuse

What disclosing feels like

We begin by reflecting on the experience of those who decide to disclose abuse, and there will always be a first time that this happens. A female survivor shares her feelings here about disclosing abuse as well as her understanding of the impact on the person who listens to her disclosure. Every survivor is unique, so this is offered as one example of a single person's feelings.

Let's appreciate the enormity of what's involved for abuse victims in deciding to disclose their abuse.

She writes:

It's the hardest thing to do. For many reasons including my awareness of:

How you might change your perception of me. See me in a light I would rather not be seen in.

The assumptions: that I will not be stable; that I can't make decisions for myself.

The judgements: am I trustworthy/vindictive? Are you judging my character. Can I be believed? Am I credible. Am I attention seeking?

I don't just have a problem as in your eyes I am the problem. I have passed on a burden that might not be wanted. I have put you under pressure to do the right thing. I am a problem you have no choice but to now deal with.

I can understand your fears:

Fear of entering a dark place.

Fear of what I might say.

Fear of being out your depth or of saying/doing the wrong thing.

Fear of the system and getting it right/wrong. Your need to cover your back.

If I sense your fear, your judgment or assumptions I am going to close down and feel a deep sense of shame and embarrassment It might confirm my worst fears that it is me who is flawed and to blame.

Maybe you can empathise with me about my fears:

Fear of no longer being in control.

Of you making decisions for me and about me, not consulting me.

Being shut down by sensing you don't want to know.

Fear of being labelled and being judged more than the person I'm complaining about.

Feeling under pressure not to come across as: unstable, a burden, damaged goods, insane, paranoid, untrustworthy,

The fear of what you might fail to see or appreciate:

I need you to understand and appreciate

That it takes strength and courage to overcome my fears and allow myself to be so vulnerable.

That I have insights and wisdom gained from the experience.

That I am much more than a person who has been abused. See the strength of my whole character and that this is one (perhaps significant) part of me that needs healing.

The strategies I have adopted to cope and compensate for what happened.

That if I'm emotional or paralysed or unravelling that it's a necessary (temporary) thing I need to go through to process what's happened to me.

That if my story is not consistent it's because there have been years of denial and internal battles discerning what is real and what is not.

I can tell you: if I am ok or not; able to decide or not; feeling rational right now or not.

What I need right now is for you to appreciate that

Policy and procedures are very important, but right now my emotional needs are most pressing. I need to be warmly and openly heard, believed and supported.

For you to:

Appreciate how difficult this is for me.

Be willing to hear and hold gently and respectfully what I am saying.

To know there are no taboo areas.

Give me the time and space I need at this crucial moment perhaps over the weeks and months to process this and decide what “we” will do, if anything.

Appreciate how difficult this is for me to trust you with this information even if it has to go further.

Ask me what I need/show care and concern for my wellbeing.

Offer me appropriate professional help or help to find it if that’s what I want.

Let me know I will be consulted and informed in every decision that will affect me and what will happen with this information.



Messages from people affected by abuse to help you understand what it's like for them

When you say or don't say ...

We need to move on.

Victims and survivors cling onto their pain - they get stuck.

I hope they (survivors) can find their way to forgiveness or worse 'they need to find forgiveness.'

When I hear you say nothing about abuse or become defensive as soon as the subject is mentioned in a church context.

we might feel/think...

I sense you're shutting down conversations that need to be had. You don't see the open wounds that I carry and also the wounds of the whole church, you don't realise the Church is bleeding. It will be harder to talk to you, because I sense you're telling me you can't cope with the pain I feel.

I feel you centre the problem within me but don't see that this is your problem too.

I feel a deep flash of anger when you say this and then sadness, and I'm in danger of plummeting down to despair. I'm not beyond forgiving the person who hurt me - what I'm REALLY struggling with is people in the church still not acknowledging the extent of the damage and taking responsibility for how the Church as a body has allowed such excruciating damage to be caused and which is still happening.

I look at you and wonder why you don't respond. Part of me feels I don't want you to know how deep and dark the wounds of abuse are - that in many ways they don't seem to heal, but in fact seem to grow inside you like a tumour.

I hear you collectively singing your songs of worship with happy faces and I wonder what thoughts you spare for those whom your church has hurt. I wonder if you ask any questions about how and if your money is used to help those the Church has wounded.

When you say or don't say ...

When you talk about abuse as 'an issue' and separate it off - as though it's something to be discussed only by those with expert knowledge.

How can we help?

I'll pray for you.

When I read diocesan websites promoting all the good works done, how happy Catholic communities are, and how important safeguarding is to the Church.

we might feel/think...

I feel concerned and frustrated - that you're leaving victim-survivors to one side and you really can't see how fundamental the Church's response to those it has wounded is for its existence.

When I heard you say this - it made me weep and gave me some hope. I've not heard that said by any clergy or diocesan workers. I wish to be with people who are asking this question. I'm not sure I know the answer to it yet - but the expressed genuine wish to help is transforming.

It makes me very wary, and I ask myself is this a cop out? I can make a hugely long list of people, clergy, religious and lay people who have told me they will "pray for me", often even say "that's all I can do" when I've asked them for some practical help. I always feel like the man in the ditch when the priest and Levite walked by. I've been told that 'God's time is different from ours and that I need to wait for God's time'. It's a way of avoiding **DOING** anything. I remember that whenever Jesus saw someone in pain or suffering, he **ALWAYS** took practical action to alleviate their suffering, and once he'd done that then prayed or blessed them.

I try not to be cynical but the glossy images can seem very hollow when I don't see candid accounts of abuse that has happened and what's been done to help individuals and communities heal. The websites don't give the appearance of a Church that is truly honest, open, and accountable. I find them dispiriting - give me real truth, and then I can find somewhere to build on real hope.

Challenges you might meet, and some suggestions for what you might say

Firstly, identify the place that the challenge might be coming from. It might be:

- A fair and legitimate question from someone who is confident in challenging.
- A challenge underpinned by the fear of tackling issues surrounding power abuse in the church. Sometimes a contribution that feels hostile or angry, can be underpinned by uncertainty or a bad experience.
- An opportunity for someone affected by abuse to see if you might be trustworthy.

Remember, you don't have to respond immediately. It is perfectly okay to say something like 'I'm so grateful you raised this, but I'm not too sure' or 'I'd like to think a bit more about it' and 'I promise that I'll get back to you'. If you can, be specific about when that might be.

It helps to do some preparation, even better with others who feel similar to yourself. For example, here are some of the challenging comments survivors and their allies have met. What could you say in reply? Feel free to add other examples of your own.

Do you worry about being seen as a troublemaker?

You're anti church, what about all the good priests out there?

Yes, of course there were some priests who did these terrible things, but so much has changed and it's all been dealt with now.

Aren't you worried that you'll do more damage than good?

I know that the abuse scandal is important, but so are other things too.

Andrew McLellan was asked by Scottish Bishops to review safeguarding policy, procedure and practice within the Catholic Church in Scotland and to make recommendations for improvement. His report, published in August 2017 "A Review of the Current Safeguarding Policies, Procedures and Practice within the Catholic Church in Scotland", highlights the importance of listening.

www.bcos.org.uk/Portals/0/McLellan/363924_WEB.pdf

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‘Every survivor of abuse has the right to meet with safeguarding personnel who should be skilled in listening. And every survivor will be much better treated if they are given the opportunity to answer these two questions:

i) What problems, if any, do YOU think the abuse has left you with?

ii) What are the main things YOU would welcome help with now?’

“A Review of the Current Safeguarding Policies, Procedures and Practice within the Catholic Church in Scotland.”

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PART TWO

Taking action and breaking through the silence.
Speaking out is our moral duty as Christians.

‘Sometimes it takes just one person to speak out and others follow.’

‘If we don’t hold bishops and priests responsible for their actions, especially when they have such privileged positions of authority, how can we ever hope to tackle the abuse crisis?’

‘A prophet says no to everything that is not of God’.

Sr Joan Chittister OSB.

Abuse of power in the church is also contrary to everything that Jesus Christ taught us. Many of us feel disempowered in the church and have little experience of speaking-up. You might hear ‘father knows best’ or ‘the catholic church is not a democracy’. We have been led to believe that priests are God’s representatives, and so, it can be difficult to challenge them when they behave like fallible human beings, misusing their authority and power.

When does silence become tantamount to acceptance of the status quo? The Canon Law of the Church mandates us to speak out.

Canon 212 §3 (The laity) ‘have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and prestige, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matters that concern the good of the Church. They have the right also to make their views known to others of Christ’s faithful...’

The hierarchy must be accountable to the people who have been abused.



The Root and Branch international forum is full of people like you. Many of us are experienced campaigners and others of us are finding our voices for the first time. You will be made welcome; you will be listened to; you will find you are not alone; you are with like-minded people.

Register with us.

<https://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/>



You might wish to build your confidence and to feel you are standing on firm ground.

You might also think about your own feelings that might get in the way of listening to and talking about abuse. Refer back to the section on disclosing which introduced this guide. Feeling apprehensive or uncomfortable is understandable, as one person said:

‘Which one of us wants to have to hear some of the awful things that survivors are sharing with us’.

And another person:

‘I know that I should break the silence surrounding abuse but what will people think?’

You can break the cycle:



What could you try?

- Discuss an article or news item about clerical abuse in a parish gathering.
- Write letters to the parish priest, a publication, your Bishop... about clerical abuse and its cover-up.
- Suggest that prayers or services are held to request wholesale changes in the church. Our baptismal gifts mean that liturgies and services should be developed and led by people like yourself.
- Establish a DIY group using our Stolen Lives DIY learning resource to reflect and learn about how the abuse of power operates in the Church.
- Lobby for an initiative such as a **LOUDFence** event to be held in your locality or diocese.



Prepare yourself

Care for yourself, talk to trusted people.

It is not easy to listen to the stories that survivors have to tell, nor easy to challenge the resistance we meet among ‘lay’ people and priests alike. So, it is important to develop a support network for yourself of people that you trust and can rely on.

Ensure that you care for yourself. Why not think about assessing the risks that you might face to help you decide if and where to focus your efforts, so that you can plan how you’ll deal with them.

For example,

You might decide to concentrate on achieving change within your parish, your pastoral area, your diocese or beyond).

You might decide to focus on writing and sharing your knowledge more widely.

People working for change have found that they have needed to

- summon their courage, identify their fears and reluctances, and understand their source.
- reflect on how they and others might be unwittingly and unwillingly enabling abuse.
- trust their consciences, the ‘voice from our relationship with God’.

If the Church is alive with the love enkindled by Christ’s Spirit, then why are crimes of clerical sexual violence so prevalent worldwide?

Seek out allies

Allies are people like yourself, who will no longer tolerate silence. Try to build a small support network of people who share the same aims, either geographically based or online. You will find that allies come from unexpected places. Challenging abuse and cover up can be supported by both ‘liberal’ and ‘traditionalist’ Catholics.

Talk to your safeguarding representative and your parish priest to find out how they view abuse of power in the church and whether they might become allies in opening up the issues. Speak with others in parish groups such as Justice and Peace, CAFOD, or faith-sharing groups.

Our Root & Branch DIY groups are great places to start. They were started by people who have been inspired by the Root & Branch movement and who wish to continue the conversation in their own parish, home group or area. They are a way for you to take the initiative for reform in your part of the world. See Appendix for an outline of what is involved, or view the template online at <https://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/diy>

You might need to weigh up how far you are prepared to act without co-operation in your parish or your local community.

Decide where you will focus your efforts

Hans Zollner SJ, in a talk to Root & Branch, reminded us to ‘work with our hearts and minds’. Heads are the easiest to change, hearts take longer as most of us will have feelings to sort out or long-held beliefs to modify.

<https://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/stolen-lives>

Sr Katrina Alton, in May 2021 advised Root & Branchers to ‘go where the energy is leading you’.
www.rootandbranchsynod.org/past-guests

Silence - What can I do to break into this? With whom and where?

Bystanding - If you hear abusive comments in Church settings, for example in sermons, parish meetings or publications, can you challenge rather than avoid? Can you be an Upstander rather than a Bystander?

Denial - (clerical and lay) Provide information, actively challenge, record responses and share them, write letters, talk to church safeguarding professionals or the vicar general for safeguarding.

Direct action - See pages 23-27 for some suggestions.

We can work at different levels and combine different approaches e.g. we might decide to facilitate prayer services as well as informing ourselves and taking some direct action.

Success in a small way is empowering, the Stolen Lives team will testify to that!!

Speaking up and whistleblowing – speaking truth to power

‘We need to support anyone willing to expose the truth and protect them.’

‘I don’t know where we would be without the bravery of the whistleblowers.’

‘If you see or hear something, say something’. ‘Speak truth to a culture of lies.’

Daniel Berrigan SJ.

Experience shows that change in the Catholic Church is nearly always forced from outside by pressure and public scrutiny. This is absolutely the case in relation to clerical violence and abuse.

We are told that the church holds fixed and immutable truths. But the church is always changing in line with increasing human consciousness. As Tom Doyle told us in February 2022,

‘The vast enormity of a deeply engrained clerical culture that allowed the sexual violation of the innocent and most vulnerable has overshadowed the theological, historical and cultural supports upon which the institutional church has based its claim to divinely favoured status.’

He also added,

‘All of the theological and canonical truths I had depended upon have been dissipated to meaninglessness.’

We can be - ‘loyal dissenters’ as Gerry Arbuckle suggests in ‘Abuse and Cover-up: Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma’, 2019, Orbis books, and we can think of ourselves as ‘God’s whistleblowers.’



Don't be a bystander: Challenge clericalist structures and cultures

Clericalism - 'A structure of power that isolates clergy and sets priests above and apart, granting them excessive authority, trust, rights, and responsibilities while diminishing the agency of lay people and religious'. The authors in graphic terms suggest that 'Clericalism is baked into ecclesial life like cinnamon in a cinnamon roll'.

Julie Hanlon Rubio and Paul J. Schutz, research study, 'Beyond Bad Apples: Exploring Clericalism as a Structural reality. [Click here >>>](#)

Our Stolen Lives Learning Resource explores how clericalism underpins abuse of hierarchical power in the church. We provide everyday examples of control tactics and misuse of power as well as criminal sexual violence.

Culture describes the way things are done in an organisation or country. It is often so taken for granted that we fail to recognise it. Cultures are stubbornly embedded, they survive changes of leaders and when firmly embedded, culture resists change. Gerry Arbuckle reminds us that '**culture eats strategies for breakfast**'.

See also, Why abuse in the church is systemic, from the Voices of Faith website by Antje Dechert <https://www.voicesoffaith.org/voices-blog/why-abuse-in-the-church-is-systemic>

Antje tells us that,

'the abuse scandals in the Catholic Church are not only due to the misconduct of individuals, but to existing power structures. Power in itself is not necessarily a bad thing.' However, victims and survivors, the world over, 'tell how the church became a crime scene, by means of violence and coercion because power was exploited'.

Tom Doyle, a Catholic priest who has devoted his ministry to working with and representing victims of clerical sexual violence, and our guest speaker in the first series of Stolen Lives talks (winter 2022), lists five points illustrating 'a harsh reality' revealed by the scandal and attempted cover-up:

1. Sexual violation and other forms of corruption are entrenched in clerical culture, which protects the clerics rather than the victims.
2. The hierarchy's obsession 'with protecting its image, stature and power at the expense of the victims has had the opposite effect and has in fact, produced an erosion of respect and trust.'
3. 'This reality has revealed a much different 'church' than that of Lumen Gentium, the Catechism, or the Code of Canon Law.'
4. The history of abuse, denial and cover-up has been "embedded in the clerical culture that not only protected but enabled it, and this culture is no longer capable of hiding, controlling, minimizing or eradicating it. Nor is it capable of continuing to sustain the myth of clerical superiority based on magical thinking about the nature of sacred orders."
5. 'This complex phenomenon is far more than the physical violation of minors by clerics and the fumbling response of church leadership.'

Speaking Truth to Power: Challenge cover-up in the Catholic Church

Hans Zollner SJ, said in his talk to Root & Branch (Nov 2022), 'I sometimes have the impression that the 11th commandment for many in the church is 'Thou shalt not produce scandal.'

The Church should be alive with the love enkindled by the Spirit of Christ. Then why are crimes of clerical sexual violence so prevalent worldwide and why have church authorities protected abusers and not believed victims? Where are the fruits of the Spirit in this?

Pope Francis has introduced stricter measures to deal with abuse cases, eliminating the "pontifical secret", stating that there is 'zero tolerance' of abuse, and introducing a protocol for investigating bishops who are accused of abuse. But the cover-up continues.

Robert Mickens, 10 November 2022, in La Croix, describes the process of Church cover up. He suggests that it often takes decades to move through these various stages. However, victims and survivors do not have decades, their lives are impacted NOW. Saying change takes time is a defence against those who want justice and change NOW!

- At first the Church authorities deny there is a problem.
- Then when faced with the facts, they bully or blame the victims and whistle-blowers.
- Eventually, when none of that works anymore, they take some "dramatic" action or draft protocols to dampen criticism and anger.
- And maybe, hopefully, they start to take full responsibility for their poor oversight and begin taking steps to heal and prevent future abuse.

We may hear that cover-up and protection of abusers is becoming a distant memory. This is not true. Only in October 2022 it was revealed that the retired bishop of Creil in France, Michel Santier, was an abuser who used the confessional as a means to abuse his victims. Church officials tried to hush this up, thankfully they were unsuccessful.

Proclaim the alternative:

A church based on Kingdom values and the Beatitudes

The ‘Light of the Nations’ (Lumen Gentium) a Vatican II document, outlines the ‘Dogmatic Constitution of the Church’. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2019, explains the sense of the faithful (sensus fidelium) in paragraph 92:

‘The whole body of the faithful. . . cannot err in matters of belief.’ This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of faith on the part of the whole people, when, from the bishops to the last of the faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals.’

What does this mean in plain English?

The “sensus fidelium,” or “sense of the faithful,” is the “church’s conviction that all believers, individually and as a whole church, have a kind of sacred common sense, sort of a shared spiritual instinct for the truth of the faith,” “It’s pointing to a kind of a mode of knowing that’s not purely the result of rational deduction, rather it’s a sort of spontaneous or natural knowledge.” Edward Hahnenberg, professor of systematic theology at John Carroll University, Ohio in 2019. <https://thedialog.org/uncategorized/sensus-fidelium-a-sacred-common-sense/>

A beatitudinal church lives out the values of the Kingdom of God. When we look to the core of Jesus’ message the beatitudes are the central moral code that he left us. We are called to live those beatitudes. We want the Church to be immersed in them. In that sense we want the Church not just to preach the beatitudes but to BE beatitudinal in everything it does, every encounter it has.



Read about Jesus’s vision of Kingdom values in Matthew’s Gospel, chapters 5 – 7: <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/podcast/matthew-chapter-5-1-20/>



Choose to participate in and organise prayers and liturgies

We hear that ‘the mission of the Church is the salvation of souls’ - then why is it destroying them through spiritual, sexual, emotional and physical abuse, violence, and cover up?

Sadly, prayer and services in relation to clerical abuse are hugely problematic for many survivors. Some abusers have used prayer as a ‘power tool’ accompanying abuse, others have used the confessional to ‘absolve’ adults whom they have sexually assaulted. Most shockingly priest abusers have even forced children who they’ve just sexually assaulted to confess to them.

We might be taking for granted that prayer will be welcomed by survivors. However, they can find the impact of prayers and liturgy extremely retraumatizing. Experiencing trauma is not an illness, it is an injury.

Here, in a survivor’s own words is a powerful account of what it feels like:

‘The experience of retraumatization happens in an instant and you have absolutely NO control over it, other than learning to recognise what might be triggering and avoiding those situations. It’s like a switch suddenly going on inside you and immediately you are plunged headlong into experiencing many very unpleasant symptoms which vary from person to person. Some people will be back with their abuser reliving the abuse, some will experience breathing problems, trembling, rising uncontrollable fear, a period of repeated nightmares or of severe insomnia. It will also vary from person to person just how long the retraumatization takes to subside. I sometimes describe it as watching a horror movie late night on TV on your own. But unlike a horror movie on TV, you haven’t chosen to turn it on and have no switch to turn it off, so it is going on and on inside you and you are forced to endure what is going on it until it turns itself off.’



If you are able, pray alone and with others. You might start a prayer chain to ask for guidance and direction. We find that Thomas Merton’s prayer is helpful in times of discouragement. This can be found at the end of this guidance. [Appendix - p.29](#)



You will also find our prayer of dissent, which is based on a reflection by Richard Rohr at the end of this document. [Appendix - p.28](#)

Services should acknowledge the need for repentance with recognition that grievous crimes have taken place and that the church seeks forgiveness from the victims and from the great majority of Catholics who are angry, horrified and deeply ashamed of the church.

Healing - Some prayers and liturgies are focused on healing. With survivors’ permission you might pray for healing for themselves and healing for a church that has betrayed its mission.

Some suggestions for what you might do

Holding a service can be a first step in highlighting clerical abuse to your parish community. The Bishops of England & Wales established a day of prayer for ‘listening to the voices of victims and survivors’ on the Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Easter, see <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/day-of-prayer-for-survivors-of-abuse/> There are beautiful prayerful services on the websites of other Christian churches. Since clerical sexual abuse is common to all Christian churches, you might be in a community where this would work ecumenically.

A short service could use some of the material from our Stolen Lives learning resource. There are many survivors’ stories that could be shared, including women religious who talk about their sexual abuse by priests. Our first recording is of two survivors of clerical sexual violence and abuse talking together about their experiences and the impact on them. YouTube also has additional resources.

The English & Welsh Bishops’ website mentions the **Isaiah Journey**. This is a group set up by the Conference of Bishops England & Wales to support survivor-centred initiatives and provide resources and prayers such as ‘Listening With Love’, which invites people to reflect on the impact of abuse on individuals and the Church.

<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/safeguarding/listening-with-love/session-one-listening-with-love/>

<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/the-isaiah-journey/>

It is important to ensure that victims of clerical sexual violence and other forms of clerical power abuse are specifically referred to in any service that you hold.

Sadly, we have heard stories of people asking their parish priest for a healing service to acknowledge the Church’s need to repent the hurt caused to so many people, including their families, friends and the parish communities they belonged to. We have heard examples of flat refusals with no openings for further dialogue.

However, it isn’t necessary to hold a prayer service in a Church. Indeed, it might be wisest and most caring not to, bearing in mind the trauma still caused to many survivors by just going near a church. Holding a service elsewhere can be an acknowledgement of this reality. Remember that by virtue of our baptism ALL members of the faithful share in the triple mission of Christ: priest, prophet, and king. We do not need the permission of a priest in order to pray.



Direct action and our moral duty to dissent: persuasion, non-co-operation and protest

‘If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way.’

‘If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.’

Dr Martin Luther-King

There are many forms of direct action that can be taken. These range from acts of witness to civil disobedience that risk arrest. In the church the equivalent might be actions such as a sit-in.

In Stolen Lives we are pledged to carry out only nonviolent actions. We believe that action and protest should be done with respect. If a priest or other figure of authority objects, please remind him that it is your church too and you are harming no one.

Some suggestions for actions that you might take alone or, even better, with others

Our Stolen Lives supporters are very creative and determined people, please send us your ideas and we’ll include them in this guide.

Reflect on the language that you use and change it if necessary

A question to ponder: does showing respect to a priest mean you must call him ‘Father’? If we want mature relationships with the clergy then we need to stop using titles that disempower lay people. Perhaps don’t call your Bishop, ‘your Grace’, just call him Bishop. These may seem trivial things, but they aren’t. How we talk to one another in power relationships is very important since it influences behaviours.

Active Prayer chains

Many people are willing to pray for victim and survivor healing, to change the hearts and minds of those in the church who refuse to recognise the reality of abuse. People who are unable to leave their homes may wish to contribute by praying.

Badge or symbol wearing

A badge can convey a strong message. For example, ‘In solidarity with all those affected by clerical abuse’ or ‘I say NO to the cover-up of clerical abuse.’ Offering badges can be a good way of signalling to victims and survivors that you may be an ally. Many people who do not want to actively protest might feel able to wear a badge. A badge offers the possibility of starting a conversation.

Silent witness

You might decide to stand with a placard or with a message written on an umbrella, highlighting a particular form of clerical abuse or offering a message of solidarity with survivors. You might decide to stand outside a diocesan event and offer your witness.

Distribute leaflets/cards about abuse

You might wish to hand out leaflets, leave them on church benches, or give them out at the back of church. It is very powerful to design a simple leaflet, with a story from a survivor of abuse (see our learning resource for many of these) with a contact number and/or email to contact for more information. You might tell a story about silence, cover-up denial. You might spotlight a different continent e.g. in India, women religious are now speaking up about being used as sex slaves by priests.

Organising a talk

Our recordings of survivors talking about their treatment by the church or the talks given by expert and committed speakers will provide much food for thought. Our learning resource also includes some reflective questions that the group could consider. You might start with friends, fellow parishioners or members of your Justice and Peace group to gain experience and confidence.

Take a look at 'Stolen Lives: in solidarity with survivors', which is based on survivors' stories of their experiences. It provides material for six different sessions on different aspects of clerical abuse.

<https://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/stolen-lives>

Non-cooperation or withholding financial support

You may have heard it said that the two great church scandals are in relation to sex and money. Sadly, survivors of abuse have been subject to financial abuse when reporting their lived experiences. Many victims and survivors report that they do not have access to therapy and counselling or pastoral support financed by the church. Others have been accused of being 'money grabbing' or 'out to make a killing'. Words to this effect have been recorded in some survivors' case files.

Bishops have not stood up to lawyers and insurers who instruct them not to make apologies in order to reduce financial liabilities. One option is to put a note in the collection box or direct giving envelopes rather than money, explaining what you are doing. Another option is to explain that a donation is being made to a survivor related charity. Pope Francis has provided us with strong comments about the evils of clerical abuse that you could include.

Remember that the funding of all the legal challenges that bishops make against abused victims of clerical crime is paid for by money from the collection plate. You don't have to pay for it if you feel your money is being misused.

Lobbying

There are many opportunities to lobby for change and reform relating to clerical sexual abuse and other forms of abuse. You might lobby for accurate and truthful information about clerical abuse to be provided or lobby for each diocesan cathedral and church to have a healing space, healing candle, sculpture or garden dedicated to victims of clerical sexual abuse.

Lobby for a **LOUDFence** initiative in your parish or cathedral. Go to the Root & Branch website, and you'll find a recording explaining how LOUDFence offers a visual and symbolic way of breaking silence around clerical abuse.

The LOUDFence team is part of Survivors Voices, 'a survivor-led organisation that harnesses the expertise of people affected by abuse in order to transform society's response to trauma and abuse.' Here is how their website describes LOUDFence:

‘LOUDfence is a visible display of support and solidarity with those affected by abuse. The ribbons tied to each fence represent the voices of those who wish to speak out in support and defence of those affected by clerical abuse. We want all survivors and victims of abuse to know that we believe you, we will hear and support you and we will do all we can to prevent this happening again. Everyone is invited to join in by tying a ribbon, pausing to reflect, offering a prayer and making a resolution, to #SmashTheSilence and #EndAbuseNow.’

<https://survivorsvoices.org/activism/loudfence/>

LOUDFence in
Plymouth Diocese,
United Kingdom,
March 2023.

Used with permission.



Active campaigning

There are many forms that campaigning can take. For example, a petition to show solidarity or to propose change in the diocese or a letter writing campaign to catholic publications, priests, bishops.

Rev Christina Rees CBE spoke at Root & Branch’s lay-led synod in September 2021 and reminded us about the **4 Ls of Campaigning**:



Letters - Individual or collective, even petitions



Lunches - Hospitality, conversations over coffee are important ways of reaching out to people.



Lectures and talks - Stolen Lives has organised several talks with all recordings available on Root & Branch’s website.



Leaflets or business cards - There are many available online, or write your own using key messages such as these examples:



Peaceful demonstrations and public witness

Many organisations including CAFOD, Christian CND, Pax Christi use peaceful direct action to show public witness to their cause. Look for examples at Catholic Non-Violent days of action which 'promote and celebrate nonviolence' between 21 September (International Day of Peace) and 2 October (International Day of Nonviolence and Gandhi's birthday). These dates align with the [Season of Creation](#), which extends from 1 September (Day of Prayer for creation) until 4 October (feast of St. Francis of Assisi.)'

<https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/days-of-action/>

On 29 August 2022, a group of seven women, representing Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW), stood in silence in St Peter's Square, each with an umbrella containing a message for the 197 cardinals as they arrived for a meeting with Pope Francis. The women handed them pamphlets and urged them 'to remember your sisters who remain outside.' It was a dignified and silent protest, but the seven women were arrested and kept in a police station for several hours before being released on bail for further investigation. This protest was about the case for women's ordination, but could equally have been about clerical power abuse.



[Click here >>>](#)



Use your digital and media knowledge and skills

Can you tweet and retweet? Do you make comments on Facebook? Do you use Instagram? These are all powerful vehicles for showing your solidarity with survivors.

Make sure that Church sponsored publications, such as diocesan magazines carry stories and information about your activities. Sadly, it has been our experience that our Stolen Lives resource has not been taken up or publicised by dioceses in the UK. We ask why should this be the case?

Concluding comment

The Stolen Lives team values enormously the help and support that victims and survivors of clerical abuse have offered us, directly or indirectly through their brave witness in making their stories public.

We sincerely hope that this short guide will help us all in moving from being bystanders to witnesses and activists for change.

Church authorities have promised to make church-wide changes, to eradicate clericalism and to stop covering up abuse. We, as ordinary Catholics wanting to make the church safe for all, are in a strong place to judge the results and outcomes of these promises.

We ask that, as someone reading this guide, that you publicise and give credit for real changes and positive outcomes that you observe, and that you also publicise examples of lack of change or progress.

**Let's end where we began!
It's our church and it's up to us!**

APPENDIX

Prayer of dissent

We wrote this prayer based on a reflection by the Franciscan priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr, who founded the Centre for Action and Contemplation. Read more about his vision for action and contemplation into the future here: <https://cac.org/>

Dear Lord,

Your Holy Scriptures reveal to us the value of self-criticism. You teach us to guard against becoming rigid, obstinate or habit bound. We know that all too often we rely on the 'taken-for-granted' way of being Christian. Open our hearts and minds to the prophets of dissent in our midst. We give special thanks for our brother, Richard Rohr, whose wisdom sustains us and inspires this prayer.

You showed such courage in dissenting from the accepted ways of being and doing, spending time with people rejected and shunned by others. Your ideas and way of being turned your world upside-down and for this you were murdered by the powerful.

Give us the humility to learn from dissent, to see critique as an opportunity to reflect and re-evaluate. Help us to discern when dissent is also inspiration and to understand, as Jewish thinkers do, that creative dissent is based on faith and love.

Send your Spirit to be with us when we find ourselves to be the dissenters. Help us to avoid cynicism and arrogance and to avoid the traps of despair and hopelessness. Show us how to remain hopeful no matter how impossible change might feel and to recognise the good in our 'opponents'.

Dear Spirit, show us how to use disagreement and dissent as opportunities for learning and to respect difference of opinion. We will try to avoid the trap of devaluing those who disagree with us. Let us remember that prophets come in all shapes and sizes and let us recognise that the most unlikely of people speak with a prophetic voice.

The Merton prayer

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that, if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Written by Trappist monk Thomas Merton. It is from 'Thoughts in Solitude'. (1958)

Breaking through the silence, in small groups

Root & Branch DIY

Here is Root & Branch's DIY template and guidance for setting up a small group.

[Click here >>>](#)

