

Roots and Branch: Stolen Lives
'Cover Up Culture'
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Child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church has corroded episcopal power, made a mockery of the institution's moral leadership and scandalised ordinary Catholics worldwide. The crimes of abuse and cover up have laid bare the craven self-interest of the institution, the arrogance of its leadership and the blatant disregard for the laws of the land.

Wherever there have been public inquiries into the Catholic Church response to child sexual abuse, assault and rape, there have been findings that Church officials placed the interests of the institution, its assets and reputation, before the welfare of children and the obligations of the law.

An all too familiar scenario has characterised the sex abuse scandal.

Victims were disbelieved and intimidated.

Church officials were found to have obfuscated, even lied, to protect offending priests and religious.

Financial reparations were modest, inconsistently applied and subject to confidentiality clauses.

An atmosphere of secrecy dominated the management of abuse cases.

Allegations of child assault were generally not reported to police and public authorities.

Known perpetrators were shifted to new posts where unsuspecting parishioners and students became their prey.

Clericalism ensured a lack of accountability and transparency.

Although records of abuse cases were kept by Church authorities dating well beyond 70 years, it is only in recent times that the extent and nature of the abuse and its cover up has been made public through the insistence of public authorities, not the honesty of the institution.

The 'cover up' culture has had insidious effect. Without doubt far fewer children would have been subject to sexual abuse if accountability, transparency, lawfulness and honesty were features of the institution's response to abuse allegations.

Let's face it. Being associated with the Catholic Church is a cause for shame. There is a collective shadow we all cast. But who has been responsible?

Bishops, religious leaders and senior Church officials exercised power ruthlessly. Victims were oppressed and truth was repressed.

Public inquiries consistently found a failure in leadership, in many cases, at the highest levels of the institution. They also point to the culture of the institution as a significant contributing factor.

Coming to terms with culture is the rubicon that must be crossed if we want to learn the lessons of the abuse scandal.

Cultural anthropologists, particularly Fr Gerald Arbuckle, stress that unless we understand how culture works we are doomed to fail in any serious endeavour for change.

How would we describe the culture of the Church?

Well, culture is what we do. But it is more than that says Arbuckle. It is primarily what we feel about what we do.

It gives the comforting feeling of order and belonging when faced with a chaotic world. It clings to us in ways we are rarely conscious. It is the safety net in times of confusion, stress or trauma. In subtle ways it inhibits personal agency and in turn controls ethical boundaries.

The Church has many micro cultures. For example, schools, parishes health and social services have distinct cultures within the broader accepted culture of the Church.

However, the features of those cultures have a logical consistency - power and authority are based on a concept of religious belief and in turn compliance.

Allegiance to the institution or congregation or even parish is aligned with a personal religious commitment to one's faith and its obligations.

So, in a very real sense participating in 'being Church', whether in institutional roles or as members of a faith community like a parish or religious congregation, is a deeply personal expression of identity and purpose.

As a consequence, when that identity and meaning making is threatened, defensiveness comes to the fore.

The abuse scandal has been analysed from the perspective of the Church as an institution with its attendant features - namely, a hierarchical structure, internal legal system, clerical caste and dominant male class.

Arbuckle counsels that this culture has a life of its own.

Its language is silent, and it is forever active in new manifestations that resist attempts of eradication.

That is, unless we confront the cover up culture, name it for what it is, actively displace the underlying myths and beliefs that fuel dysfunction, we are at risk of it prevailing in ever new and potent ways.

Arbuckle, along with others, describes the culture that gave rise to and concealed child sexual abuse as being both corrupt and systemic. As such, those responsible for the scandal are those who oversaw a system and processes that were in turn corrupt.

That is why the Church must not be able to investigate itself, nor keep any of its internal process of complaint handling at a distance from the law.

Catholics have struggled with the reality that some bishops, religious leaders and Church officials have been corrupt. The leaders themselves

have been shocked that their behaviour is seen as corrupt. This speaks volumes about the culture in which the behaviour occurred.

The fact that otherwise decent people can be blind to their actions such that they apparently fail to see the evil implications of their decisions demonstrates how powerfully the culture of compliance to the interests of an institution can work.

That the culture can portray loyalty as a priority above all else, even the welfare of vulnerable children, indicates how an institution's values shape the mindset and instincts of its adherents, particularly in times of crisis and threat.

See how intractable the hierarchy are to amending the protocols of the sacrament of confession.

When a child tells a priest that they have been abused, they are not confessing their sin. Yet the Roman Curia insists that this information cannot be shared by the priest under the threat of breaking the seal of confession. Even though the seal does not apply to a child sharing information about a sin perpetrated on them.

This intransigence and relegation of the welfare of the child to the interests of the institution makes a mockery of the rhetoric Church leaders mouth in front of TV cameras and public inquiries.

If they genuinely wanted to respect the dignity and worth of the child they would find a way through the dilemma. Even when the Church has been challenged to do so, it dismisses the proposal outright and then plays the 'culture wars' card and the need for religious freedom.

Meanwhile the trust of the community continues to wane.

It was this collective mindset that facilitated the cover ups and concealments.

It was the same mindset that sought to excuse bishops and leaders whilst being careful not to excuse the perpetrators.

This is mindset that is determined to safeguard the institution and stave off necessary reform.

Of course, within that culture there are individuals with their own moral compass.

The records show that clergy and religious did speak out on occasion, did object to the treatment of victims, did leave in protest.

But the reality is that the weight of the culture to comply, turn a blind eye, rationalise, even excuse was so suffocating that the corruption continued unabated.

The revelations of abuse and its management has eroded trust in bishops and leaders.

Frankly, they alone are incapable of addressing the cultural questions. Only a collective effort, laity and clergy signed on to a process of reform, will have any chance of remediating the defects of the culture.

We need to move into a period of intentional disruption.

This is best done in a public and accountable fashion.

Dioceses should establish cultural audits with specific terms of engagement that examine the everyday workings of the Church in all its manifestations. The results need to be made public and be open for public discussion. It is a starting point but not an end in itself.

Substantial reform requires a commitment for change that is prepared to risk identity and reputation, pursue a refounding in integrity and tolerate the loss of adherents who can't make the journey.

The institution needs to shed the implicit assumptions and beliefs that cause violence, abuse and cover up.

It requires identifying those attitudes that condone ruthless behaviour, expedient approaches to vulnerable people and lying to save the institution.

It must acknowledge and address how power is exercised, how participation in decision making is manipulated and by whom.

It needs to demonstrate how the dependency on a rigid identity and institutional character perpetuates a culture that disenfranchises adherents, denies wrong doing, protects the powerful and instils secrecy as a working assumption.

It needs to acknowledge those myths and stories that are false and lead to evil outcomes.

Notions such as a judgemental God that only leads to persecution and despair. Concepts like, intrinsically disordered sexuality that discriminates and demonises.

Arbuckle and others counsel that strategy alone will not suffice. Culture is too powerful and regenerative to be contained just by new practices and protocols.

Culture always fights back, clouding the truth and keeping unconscious that which must be brought into the light.

Confronting the institution is a perilous task. This is particularly so when the institution is in a state of trauma.

Australian bishop the late Geoffrey Robinson famously wrote that to get to the core of the corrupt cover up culture the Church must confront its approach to power and sex. He was castigated in conservative circles. Yet vindicated by all public inquiries.

The abuse of power and the jaundiced attitude towards sex have rendered the institution increasingly ossified in its pastoral and mission activities.

His siren call was aggressively hushed because too many people, in positions of power, comfort and entitlement feared the collapse of the house of cards.

The upshot is a Church in despair.

The disenchantment of the laity with the institution has left episcopal leadership confused and frightened.

The active pursuit of civil and criminal claims by victims has senior officials defensive and paranoid, concerned or obsessed over the future assets of the Church.

The loss of public esteem and corruption in their ranks has the clergy demoralised and disorganised.

The Catholic community is shocked and increasingly 'voting with their feet'. Participation in weekend worship is dropping at alarming rates.

With the loss of trust in bishops and the clergy, it is now left to the laity to drive the change, insist on co-responsible governance of dioceses and Church ministries so that a relevant pastoral engagement will characterise the presence of Catholicism in our world.

This paradigm shift in governance will be resisted.

If not for any other reason than bishops fear that sharing governance responsibilities is somehow to lose authority.

That fear is based on the assumptions that underpin any hierarchical structure. That is, those at the top have the authority, regardless of competency or capability.

It must be said, that to be blindly loyal to the hierarchical, patriarchal institution, as if this is God's will for the Church, is a modern-day heresy.

Moreover, it embeds a 'veto mentality' on behalf of the bishops. It instils a sense of intimidation for subordinates and hesitancy to question and critique.

It builds a dysfunctional notion of loyalty and ultimately breeds a disposition of passivity and compliance regardless of the facts or circumstances.

This type of culture finds no place for accountability and transparency.

Rather it marks success in terms of the eradication of conflict and the quashing of dissent. It turns religious instruction into ideology, religious identity into political posturing and religious affiliation into a character test.

Our Church is at a low ebb.

The scandal has shown how venal the institution can be.

The loss of trust threatens to widen and split the Church between those seeking change and those clinging to a pre Vatican II styled hierarchy and medieval structure.

We need to embark on the slow, arduous task of cultural reform.

The scandal has broken the heart of our Church.

Catholics intuitively know that the Church has not acted in a way consistent with the Gospel.

Reform must be based on the Gospel. It must be Spirit led. We must put on 'the mind of Christ', not the mentality of corporate risk management.

In practical terms some fundamentals are required.

1. Reform is not merely a political exercise as much as it is a desire for authenticity and integrity in the light of the Gospel.
2. Bishops and Leaders need to sign on to reform. Without those in positions of authority being fully on board, the tensions for change will split the Church rather than heal and grow the faith community.
3. Reform is a process of co-responsibility. That is, laity and clergy, equally involved in all stages of analysis and decision making. Synodality employed properly can facilitate mutual discernment.
4. Canon law should reflect discerned directions for the Church, in structure and pastoral practice.

The methodology to address reform also needs to be outlined. The working assumptions are:

1. Best practice organisational and cultural insights be applied to Church structures and processes.
2. Democratised wherever possible – decision making, appointment processes, financial accountabilities.
3. Integrate gender balance and diversity at all levels of governance.

4. Encourage and facilitate public scrutiny and reporting
5. Function as an open as opposed to closed system.

Most importantly, reform and its practice need to be nourished and directed by a spirituality that is open, humble and searching.

As a faith community that means humility.

The good news is that a lot of the groundwork for change has already been done.

Well considered pathways to achieve greater accountability and transparency in governance and management have been outlined.

Post the Royal Commission in Australia, bishops and religious leaders commissioned an examination into diocesan and other Church governance and management structures.

The resulting *Light From the Southern Cross Report* provides practical and far reaching recommendations that shift the paradigm from a hierarchical culture, reliant on the residue of clerical privilege to a more synodal culture of mutual participation between laity and clergy in models of co-responsible governance.

Why insist on this governance shift?

Governance is ultimately about the stewardship of our Church.

Integral to that stewardship are teachings and pastoral outreach that are relevant and engaging of contemporary life.

Lay women and men, as much as clergy and religious, are the sources of experience and wisdom to inform good decision making and sound foundations for teaching and pastoral practice.

Actively engaging the insights from the physical and human sciences, including cosmology and ecological understandings will better ground our theology of the human person and in turn break down discrimination and exclusion.

It will provide the foundations for a more relational based moral theology, a respect for gender that insists on equality and an encouragement of democratic and inclusive governance.

This sets the Church on a new course, more relevant for post modern times and less clerical.

It frees up the faithful to better hear the cries of the Spirit and more creatively respond to the missionary impulse Pope Francis says is our clarion call.