

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is both morally repellent and a criminal offence. Moreover, it has ruined the lives of many of its victims and done significant damage to those communities and institutions in which it has been prevalent. The Catholic Church has been the site of many instances of serious child sexual abuse. Moreover, members of the Catholic Church failed to report many instances of serious child sexual abuse to the police and covered-up instances of child sexual abuse. For example, the case of the convicted, and now de-frocked, priest Gerard Ridsdale is particularly damning for the Catholic Church in Australia. Ridsdale was convicted of abusing 65 children, including the charge of rape. These offences are heinous – two of the victims were abused only hours after their father’s funeral. There is evidence to suggest that some members of the Church knew of Ridsdale’s crimes but did not contact the police and ensure that children were protected. The victims suffered tremendously from Ridsdale’s abuse at the time and later in life when many suffered from relationship problems, drug and alcohol abuse, lost opportunities because of the disruption to their schooling etc. Furthermore, it has been argued that Ridsdale’s crimes contributed to the suicides of ex-altar boys¹. There are many more, possibly thousands, of harrowing cases of child sexual abuse committed by church workers, including priests, in

¹ We note that Ridsdale’s acts of child sexual abuse and those of most of the other perpetrators of horrific child sexual abuse were not discovered by the investigations of inquiries. The remit of these inquiries was to investigate the responses of the Church and other institu-

Ireland, the United States, and Australia – the three countries dealt with by the commissions of inquiry that this work is, primarily, concerned with. Accordingly, the fundamental fact that needs to be acknowledged at the outset of this work is that thousands of the Catholic Church’s priests, church workers, bishops et al. in Ireland, the United States, and Australia are alleged to be, or were, alleged to be responsible for widespread child sexual abuse over a lengthy period of time, either as perpetrators or as, in effect, protectors of perpetrators. What the actual scale of this child sexual abuse was, and over what period of time, is the subject of this present work, as is the actual response of the Catholic Church to child sexual abuse.

In answering these questions, we rely on what we will refer to as (respectively) the Irish Inquiry, the John Jay Inquiry (United States), and the Australian Inquiry (of which more below). We acknowledge the importance of these inquiries in shedding light on child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and rely on these inquiries for their statistical data in particular. However, we also critically analyse their methodologies and findings, and identify shortcomings as appropriate. Official inquiries ought not themselves to be exempt from scrutiny. The importance of this point is graphically illustrated by, what have turned out to be, deeply flawed inquiries. One such inquiry is the *Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report*. This report was deemed to be in breach of the *Investigating Grand Jury Act* by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 2019. Indeed, some of its findings were ordered to be sealed permanently. Of particular concern, the Supreme Court justices argued that the *Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report* did not protect people from the harm of unproven allegations. For example, «...it is not “in the public interest”, as contemplated by the Act, to utilize an investigating grand jury report to mete out punishment or provide relief for specific victims of unproven, albeit serious, crimes when the traditional means of bringing an individual to justice – e.g. – criminal prosecution – are otherwise unavailable» (Baer 2019, 10).

We have chosen to analyse the Irish Inquiry, the John Jay Inquiry, and the Australian Inquiry for the following reasons. The Irish Inquiry was the most prominent inquiry into child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and influenced later inquiries. This book analyses three component inquiries of what is referred to as the Irish Inquiry, namely, the *Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (Ryan Report), the *Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation* (Murphy Report) and, the *Report into the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne* (Cloyne Report). The Irish Inquiry’s influence on later inquiries has been beneficial in a number of respects. However, its influence has been unhelpful in other respects. For instance, some later inquiries imported methodological errors from the Irish Inquiry. The John Jay Inquiry into the Catholic Church in the USA was chosen because of its significant impact in this area of research and because subsequent inquiries often reference the conclusions of the John Jay Inquiry. The John Jay Inquiry comprised

tions to allegations of child sexual abuse, or in the case of the John Jay Inquiry to analyse the nature, causes and the extent of the problem.

of two reports: *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002*; and *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010*. The Australian Inquiry, *the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, was selected because it is the most recent of the international inquiries into child sexual abuse that has been completed. Moreover, it was chosen because the current UK inquiry, *the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*, and the current NZ Inquiry, *the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in Care* both worked in consultation with the Australian Royal Commission. The UK and NZ inquiries have imported not only some of the strengths but also some of the weaknesses of the Australian Royal Commission; weaknesses we outline in Chapter Three. Please see Appendix One for a fuller discussion of *the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse* and Appendix Two for a fuller discussion of *the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in Care*.

In many of the cases of child sexual abuse by the likes of Ridsdale and others, church leaders failed to protect children and excused the behaviour of offending priests and church workers (Broken Rites, n.d.). These cases have been widely publicised in the media and most people are familiar with at least some of them. Indeed, the media has highlighted the problem of child sexual abuse and has influenced decision-makers. However, notwithstanding this, many media reports, allegedly based on these inquiries, are biased, misleading and contain factual errors. This misleading reporting has resulted in the creation, in the public mind, of a false impression of the extent of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church; especially of the extent of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church at the present time. Thus, many media reports fail to make clear that most of the allegations of child sexual abuse (in some inquiries as many as 90%) are allegations concerning events which, if the allegations are correct, took place on average 30 years ago. For instance, a recent prominent article in the Australian media (Ting 2017), while it correctly states the findings of the Australian Inquiry in respect of the number of allegations of child sexual abuse between 1980 and 2015, fails to point out that 94.2% of allegations (regarding the Catholic Church) concern events that are alleged to have occurred prior to 1990, some 30 years ago (RCIRCSA 2017, Vol. 16, Book 1, 17). In short, as will emerge in this book, what has been called the ‘crisis’ of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, in so far as it relies on the evidence provided by these inquiries, is, in large part, an historical problem at least in Ireland, the United States, and Australia². Furthermore, media reports also fail to make clear that safeguarding mechanisms and redress schemes introduced in the Catholic Church in the mid-late nineties have evidently been effective since reported incidents of child sexual abuse, in the Catholic Church in the Western world, in recent years are very low.

² But also in a number of other countries in which official inquiries have been undertaken, e.g. Netherlands (Deetman 2011).

Furthermore, it is not often reported that many of the allegations made to inquiries into child sexual abuse are untested and certainly contain some instances of false reports, define a child as someone under 18 years of age (and, therefore, potentially above the age of consent), and contain allegations of child sexual abuse across a wide spectrum, from less serious non-contact abuse to violent gang rapes.

Regarding false allegations, perhaps the most spectacular example is that of the allegations made against Cardinal George Pell in Australia. In 2020 the High Court of Australia quashed the criminal charges made against Pell – that he had raped two choir boys in the sacristy of the Catholic Cathedral in Melbourne immediately following mass in 1996. These charges were quashed on the grounds that it was highly improbable, if not impossible, that the alleged offences could have taken place (Keifel et al. 2020). For a more detailed discussion see section 3.12. The Pell case is now seen as a textbook case of a miscarriage of justice.

This book stands in contrast to the overall media reporting of the problem of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. This book strives to be an objective, evidence-based analysis of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and of the responses of the Catholic Church to it. Commentary on this subject is often characterised more by emotion and ideology (whether radical or conservative) than by a commitment to the facts and to principles of reasoning. As already mentioned, the book relies in large part on the evidence provided by the three key inquiries into child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church conducted in Ireland, the USA, and Australia respectively, i.e. it relies on the best available evidence. Based on this evidence, we outline the extent of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland, the USA, and Australia during the periods in question. The extent of this child sexual abuse is, unsurprisingly, a damning indictment of the Catholic Church. However, also based on this evidence, we draw two conclusions that many will find surprising, especially in the light of the overall media coverage. Firstly, child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in the countries surveyed, while widespread during the 1960s and 1970s in particular, is largely an historical problem. Secondly, a significant array of safe-guarding mechanisms and other initiatives, such as training programs, have been introduced into the Catholic Church since the 1990s. Moreover, given the sharp decline in allegations of incidents of child sexual abuse alleged to have occurred since the 1990's, overall, these mechanisms appear to have been effective in curbing child sexual abuse. That said, a number of processes that the Catholic Church put in place seem not to have been effective. For instance, the Catholic Church provided psychological and counselling services to offenders and these proved ineffective in many cases.

Chapter One is an analysis of the Irish Inquiry (comprised of the Ryan, Murphy and Cloyne reports). Most of the complaints detailed in the Irish Inquiry concern instances of child sexual abuse that allegedly occurred decades before the complaints were made. A notable feature of the Ryan Report, in particular, are the large number of complaints of child sexual abuse in industrial and reformatory schools which were publicly funded but largely owned and managed by

religious congregations. We note that the industrial schools were closed by the mid-70s and many of the allegations related to events that occurred 40 years prior to the mid-70s.

Chapter Two is an analysis of the John Jay Inquiry into child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church of the USA. The John Jay Inquiry argues that 1970 was the year that most acts of child sexual abuse began, with incidents of child sexual abuse peaking in 1980. Furthermore, according to the inquiry more abuse occurred in the seventies than in any other decade, and, importantly, there are few allegations of incidents of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in the USA that are alleged to have happened in recent years. That said, this is not to deny that child sexual abuse still occurs in the Church, and may well occur in larger numbers than are reported, given delays in reporting child sexual abuse.

Chapter Three offers an analysis of the findings of the Australian *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, as far as they relate to the Catholic Church in Australia. As with the Irish Inquiry and the John Jay Inquiry, the evidence provided by the Australian Royal Commission points to significant child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. However, again as with the Irish Inquiry and the John Jay Inquiry, it also indicates that the ‘crisis’ of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is, in large part, an historical problem. Again, this is not to deny that the Catholic Church was the site of many horrific instances of child sexual abuse and that it failed the victims of this abuse on multiple occasions. However, it is to reject the currently dominant media perspective on the issue in Australia, e.g. that a significant number and percentage of currently serving priests are child sex offenders.

A notable feature of the Catholic Church in Australia’s response to child sexual abuse in its ranks was the design and implementation of one of the world’s first redress schemes for victims of child sexual abuse. This redress scheme was put in place in 1996 prior to the establishment of the Australian Inquiry and thus prior to the redress scheme introduced in 2018 as a result of the Australian Inquiry.

In addition to outlining the nature, extent and historical time frames of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in the three countries, we discuss the key recommendations made by each of the three inquiries concerning child safety measures in the Catholic Church, in particular. We also outline the child safety measures introduced by the Catholic Church, both prior to and in response to these recommendations, e.g. changes in reporting procedures. Child safety measures introduced by the Catholic Church since the 1990s in the USA, for instance include, new procedural laws and policies, developments in seminary training that engage with the topic of child sexual abuse, better vetting processes, the creation of committees to respond to the problem, and the creation of redress schemes for victims of child sexual abuse. As mentioned above, we argue that the evidence suggests that, by and large, these safeguarding mechanisms have been successful in preventing child sexual abuse in the Church and that, generally, complaints are now handled in an effective manner. It is also argued that there is still room for improvement. and in some dioceses, considerable improvement.

In closing this overall introduction, we reiterate that the focus of this book is analyses of three of the most important global inquiries into child sexual abuse and their recommendations. A discussion of the impact of child sexual abuse, especially its harmful effects on victims, is beyond the scope of this work. Moreover, there has already been much written on this subject³. However, it is worth stressing once again that the harm of child sexual abuse is very great. For instance,

Child sexual abuse is, according to studies, linked with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional and behavioural problems, interpersonal relationship difficulties and suicidal behaviour in both childhood and adult life, which places children at further health and emotional risk. It is recognised that where child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a clergyman, its impact on the victim can have additional consequences such as a loss of faith and an alienation from religion. Many victims have spoken of the profound sense of loss this has caused. Research on clerical sexual abuse carried out in Ireland indicates that when victims reported their abuse and received an inadequate response from church authorities, they experienced re-traumatisation (The Ferns Inquiry 2005, 19).

However, what needs also to be stressed, if the nature and extent of child sexual abuse is to be ascertained and, therefore, the harms of child sexual abuse prevented, is the importance of evidence-based research unadulterated by ideology, hysteria and media sensationalism.

Due to word constraints, the focus of this work concerns the significant findings and recommendations of these inquiries. That said, the full reports of these inquiries are available to the public and we encourage readers of this book to read the reports of the commissions of inquiry for themselves. References to details in the reports exist throughout this work. We certainly do not view the commentary in this book as the last work on this important subject. On the contrary, it is our hope that this book will stimulate further discussion on child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church.

We also stress this work focuses on countries which have conducted inquiries into child sexual abuse. In these three countries the Catholic Church has put in place an array of mechanisms to ensure child-safety and done so before and after the respective commissions of inquiry. Indeed, the implementation of these child safety mechanisms has benefited some countries that have not themselves established commissions of inquiry. However, there is obviously a risk that there are unacceptably high instances of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in countries that have not conducted their own inquiries and/or have not put in place safeguarding measures to protect children.

³ Please see Browne and Finkelhor 1986; Briere and Elliott 1994; Spataro et al. 2004.