

BOOK REVIEW

Child Sexual Abuse Inquiries and the Catholic Church: Reassessing the Evidence. Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2021.

Author: Virginia Miller

Publisher: Firenze University Press

ISBN: 978-88-5518-278-2

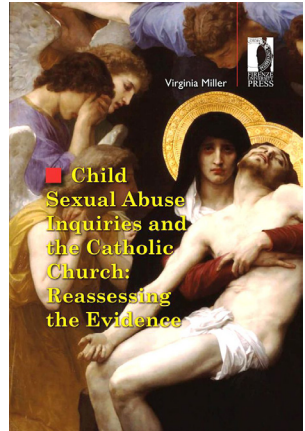
Paperback, 174 pages

Price: \$21.95

Reviewed by Damian Grace*

Some media still give the impression that child abuse in the Catholic Church is systemic, current, and endogenous. Virginia Miller's book challenges this. She argues that once the Church grasped the magnitude of historic child sexual abuse, it introduced largely effective measures to deal with it. These efforts have been given little recognition, not least by commissions of inquiry and media reports of them. She examines child abuse enquiries in Ireland, America, and Australia, with appendices on the English and Welsh Independent Inquiry and the New Zealand Royal Commission.

Her comparison shows important commonalities, such as the rejection of homosexuality as a factor in the crisis (which she finds strange), but there is a crucial difference between the John Jay reports commissioned by the American bishops in 2002 and the other inquiries. Unlike the public inquiries, John Jay provided little theatre. The Irish, Australian, British and New Zealand inquiries functioned as legal dramas producing a social catharsis. Indeed, John Jay was criticised for not doing this. In evaluating the evidence and procedures of these inquiries, Miller does not argue that they were unnecessary or that the Church should not be held responsible.



* Damian Grace is co-author of *Reckoning: The Catholic Church and child sexual abuse* (2014).

She does conclude, however, that too little recognition has been given to measures the Church has taken to protect children and deal with offenders.

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was the biggest and most expensive but not the most reliable inquiry. Miller finds its processes and conclusions wanting. She questions the Commission's ready acceptance of repressed memories; its recommendation that judges should not warn juries about the uncorroborated testimony of one complainant; its claim that 7% of priests have offended; and its reporting of data from private sessions without sufficiently stressing that these data were compiled from unsworn and unsubstantiated claims. She compares Australian procedures unfavourably with those of John Jay, which tested evidence, classified the gravity of offences, and consistently used forensically appropriate language. She examines the case of Cardinal Pell because it aligns with her general concerns about reliable evidence. Pell's head was not delivered by the Royal Commission, but Victorian authorities did their best to compensate. The High Court thwarted that objective, but its judgment did not chasten those prepared to accept even improbable allegations of abuse.

The largest part of Miller's book concerns the Irish inquiry, broken down into Ryan, Ferns, Murphy, and Cloyne. One lesson to be drawn from Miller's examination of their shortcomings is that the culpability of the Church deflected attention from the state. The Church was the main provider of substitute care, was inadequately funded, and then blamed for neglect. The Church, not the Gardai, provided documentation that allowed the Murphy inquiry to proceed. Ferns accepted that state authorities did not know of abuse prior to 1990 but claimed the Church should have. Cloyne criticised the diocese for not reporting dead perpetrators to the Health Department, whose job was to assess risks for children, not hold statistics on historical offences. Murphy concluded without evidence that "the vast majority" of Dublin priests turned a blind eye to the offending minority, a claim duly editorialised by *The Irish Times*. Yet, when the Church asked the Gardai to screen candidates for ordination the request was refused. In forcing the Church to be accountable and creating public theatre, these inquiries got the Irish state off an uncomfortable hook.

The John Jay inquiry was initiated in 2002 to investigate the nature and scope of child abuse within the Church. This it did, revealing that around 4% of priests were offenders. Most of these were not paedophiles,

psychologically driven to abuse, but opportunists who might, on an impulse, take advantage of an adolescent, most likely a boy; and the inquiry found most offences by clergy were one-offs. Miller found the American report superior to those of the Irish and Australian inquiries because it did not gloss complexities. It declared abuse to be historical, at its worst from the 60s to the 80s. It found the Church had responded effectively. Unlike the Ferns and Australian inquiries, John Jay ruled out celibacy as an explanation of abuse. It differed from them in finding that the Catholic Church resembled other large social institutions. This was not what communities in shock wanted to hear. For them the crisis is current, and their anger remains strong.

The English and Wales inquiry flatly denies that the worst of child abuse in the Church is historical. It cites more than 100 allegations since 2016, but Miller fillets the report and its investigations. The methods of the New Zealand Royal Commission fare no better.

The book has minor errors (e.g., Emmanuel Macron is President, not Prime Minister, of France) and its readability isn't helped by a dense page design and Miller's style. Repetition, redundancy, and idiosyncratic punctuation make the going hard. Nevertheless, this is a work that deserves a serious response. Its conclusions must be considered brave in the face of prevailing attitudes. Miller could not cover all the problems raised by the commissions of inquiry, but she has placed herself in a strong position to continue her work in this field. This book shows that the questioning has a long way to go.