The Work of Child Protection: the Enterprise of Faith

The Nolan Report – Five Years On: Conference July 11th 2006

Catholic Office for the Protection of Children & Vulnerable Adults (COPCA)

John McDade SJ

Anthony Burgess' novel *The End of the World News* imagines a cycle in society between what he calls an Augustinian phase and a Pelagian phase. You'll know that in the early Christian Church, Augustine and Pelagius were in dispute about the capacity of human nature to live coherently and morally. Augustine tended towards a pessimistic view of our nature: radically flawed, and without God's gift of charity, we are free only to sin. Pelagius, by contrast, takes an optimistic view of our nature, believing that the possibility of leading a morally fruitful life belongs within our capacity because there are no structural flaws in the human condition. The reason we are not holy is that we don't want to be holy. Many sermons are Pelagian, but in my experience exhortations rarely produce an improvement in moral and spiritual behaviour. But it's no less true that many sermons are deeply Augustinian and you begin to wonder how, if there's as much sin around as the preacher thinks, there manages to be so much virtue.

For Burgess, in the Augustinian phase society is aware of the corruption within us and imposes restrictions, rules, prescriptions in order to ensure that the true reality of our nature cannot express itself. And of course, this regulation works, producing a highly disciplined society in which people behave themselves. The consequence, however, is that people come to be complacent about the way we are: after all, they say, we're not as bad as we used to think. Do we really need all these restrictions? This unreflective confidence in the goodness of our nature then gives rise to a Pelagian phase when restrictions are eliminated and human nature is trusted to behave well without regulation and prescription. And then of course what happens is that this produces a disorder which is corrected by the imposition again of regulations and controls. That's the cycle.

The popular perception of the 1960s for example is a classic Pelagian moment; the myth of California that springs from it is of a hedonistic paradise devoted to a fulfilment which is at once sensual and spiritual. The body is the gateway to the soul, desires are to be 'befriended' (horrible word) rather than controlled and the great horror shared by all is of living an unfulfilled life. The view that holiness is the only fulfilment towards which our nature is truly directed is strangely ignored. In Thomas Aquinas' terms, our 'final cause' (what we will become, namely united to God) is more decisive than our starting point (our shared history of sin). In a phrase in which all the elements are important, Aquinas tells us that 'glory is the goal of the operation of nature itself assisted by grace' (*ST*, 1, 63, 3, ad 3). To paraphrase this: the human person is a dynamic movement ('nature') towards union with God ('glory') and this is sustained and made possible by nothing less than God himself ('grace'). The puzzle for every Christian generation is that if that is the way we are, how do we manage to miss this target so comprehensively.

Could we say that the Nolan Report and the work of the Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults is a Pelagian moment? Hardly. My guess is that

those of you who have been involved in these matters have a sense of being sullied, contaminated by what they've had to deal with. Paul Ricoeur suggests that the primary perception of evil is of evil as stain: it makes us feel unclean and tainted. A sense of defilement in relation to certain things, I think, is part of humanity's natural religion. If anything, as people working for the protection of children, you must have been tempted to an Augustinian pessimism about human nature as it is and the Church as it is. When I teach Christian-Jewish relations to my students, I tell them that if Augustine were to stand at the gates of Auschwitz, he wouldn't be at all surprised by what happened there. He would say, 'that's what you should expect when the divine law that comes to us from revelation and the inner law of conscience are rejected, when human nature stands unaided.' What might he say about the need for child protection? Surely the same thing. He would have seen in this matter a symptom of the radically flawed human nature that is ours.

His particular emphasis is the solidarity of all human beings in a consistent pattern of blocked and self-ruining behaviour. For him, 'existential human nature [the way we actually are] is the product of personal and corporate history'.[1] Chesterton's comment that original sin is the one part of Christian teaching that can be proved is nearly right: it can be experienced consistently by every person in every generation and so intimate is it to our personal reality that there is no membrane separating it from my selfhood. A pattern of misdirected thoughts, feelings and actions strangely fits us. Pascal remarked that human beings are so complex, simultaneously so great and wretched, that even out of deep-grounded concupiscence we manage to construct a parody of divine love:

> Man's greatness even in his concupiscence. He has managed to produce such a remarkable system from it and make it the image of true charity.
> We have established and developed out of concupiscence admirable rules of polity, ethics and justice, but at root, the evil root of man, this evil stuff of which we are made is only concealed; it is not pulled up. [2]

The puzzle is how we are able with such ease to develop patterns of blocked and perverted charity: this is what Augustine's teaching about original sin probes so incisively. I interpret the teaching about original sin in this way: in common with all those before us, and in common with all those after us, each person has a capacity for self-ruination which is not an empty potential but is active enough to be experienced and observed. If sin is characterised by a lack of freedom, by impulses that work against my good and the common good, by fumbled and inadequate attempts to capture wholeness and fulfilment, by compulsion and repetition, by a failure to grow out of inappropriate and immature patterns, then what you have had to deal with in this area is emblematic of our wider condition. As Ezra Pound put it in a draft of one of his late Cantos: 'Charity I have had sometimes/ But I cannot make it flow through.' We may have irruptions of charity, but it is not a consistent pattern of identity in most of us, most of the time.

Some years ago I had an insight that was as original as finding out that coal is black, but it's been in my mind since then: as the centuries go by, the world does not get any worse and this is because there is no accumulation of evil across the generations. Neither does the world get any better because there is no accumulation of goodness across the generations. If you have two good parents, your 'goodness' will not be the sum of theirs;

---

[1] P.Rigby, 'Original Sin' in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed.A.D.Fitzgerald (Eerdmans, 1999), 608.
[2] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 118, 221, tr. A.J.Krailsheimer (Penguin Classics, 1995).

the same applies if your parents are bad people. So, dark pessimism that things are getting worse is ruled out, as is a liberal optimism that things are getting better as time goes by. A Christian can only sing New Labour's anthem, 'Things can only get better' with a sense of detached irony. It seems to me that Christianity has a 'steady state' view of human nature: the way we are now is no better than the way people were earlier and the way people will be in the future.

No one sins alone, just as no one prays alone or reaches heaven alone. If we take seriously the corporate character of all sin and of all sinners, then the role of casting the first stone is forbidden to us, as the Lord said. The sin of abusing children that other people commit belongs in the same continuum as the sins that you and I bring before Christ and for which we ask mercy. Is that an easy thing to acknowledge? I don't think it is, especially for people with a strong sense of the moral dimension of Christian spiritual life. But if it is recognised and taken seriously, then the impulse to demonise others is forbidden to us: apart from the Saviour and his Blessed Mother, we are all at the same distance from God that we call sinfulness.

While thinking about this talk, I wondered if it was right to use the category of sin in this area. Is it helpful? Is it right? Are not other categories, drawn from the discipline of psychology for example, more accurate, more useful? Indeed in many ways they are and they must be used. To think about these things only in a religious way leads to muddles and confusions because a solely religious explanation can obfuscate rather than help: exhortations and hopes that things and people will improve is, as we know, no answer at all to these matters. Those in authority in the Church have not known how to think about these things – hence all the problems we have had, prompted not by malice or concealment but confusion and uncertainty based upon lack of professional expertise. (The Church is not the only agency to find that did not know how to deal with child abuse.) Surely one of the strengths of the Nolan Report was that it insisted that publicly accountable performance, professionally monitored, is not a threat to the Church but a condition of its being seen as a credible witness to the Gospel it proclaims. If the Church is to deal professionally with this matter, it has to be based upon the best science, the best procedures, the best treatments available to us. It's wholly to the Church's benefit that it draws upon insights developed outside the circle of religion.

I remember a Jesuit in my Province saying to me, 'Christianity lacks an anthropology of its own, and always has to learn from other sources what it means to be human'. Not an opinion to be defended without qualification, of course, but an intriguing suggestion because it points to an empty chamber at the heart of Christian faith which is always being filled by insights drawn from different disciplines and by experiences which take place outside the Christian community's framework. The complexity of the human condition needs to be illuminated from multiple perspectives and disciplines and we can think *religiously* about these matters only if we have drawn upon the best professional and scientific approaches to human reality.

Let's go back to the question why invoke the category of sin and redemption at all in relation to these problems? Because in the end, this kind of language is needed if there is to be any hope at all for human beings. We've lost sight of the principle that most of what the Church knows is prophetic and proceeds out of a perspective of *hope*. This is not meant to be a mystifying phrase. What I mean is this: only God resolves the enigma of evil and wrong-doing in the human family and we are not yet at the point of having those enigmas resolved. Only God brings the history of our race to completion, brings

the cycle of stunted evil to an end, binds up the wounds of the broken and effects justice. Those who are broken by evil will be healed and those who are responsible for evil will be judged by God. It is through the virtue of hope that we connect with that resolution of evil and wrong-doing.

It is no accident that the Christian tradition says that in God, and in God alone, justice and mercy are complete and do not stand in conflict with one another. For us, they are always experienced as standing in tension with one another: rarely, if ever, do we find ways of acting which are simultaneously merciful and just. In this area of the abuse of children, bishops and those in positions of authority know this better than most. The virtue of hope tells us that in the mystery of God's triune life the innocent will be vindicated, the guilty judged and that there will be a final condition of justice, order and transformative love.

Christian faith is so in awe of how evil and its consequences are resolved that it says that the death of the Son of God on a malefactor's cross is necessary in order to move humanity towards the resolution of the wrong done by malefactors. Only the body of the abused and sin-bearing Christ taking evil upon himself can becomes the locus of the world's atonement and from that body, *Corpus Christi*, in its three fold form (the Crucified and risen Body, the Eucharistic elements and the body of Church) forgiveness flows to the world. We are not in a position to will ourselves into completion: that's where Pelagius was wrong. Instead, we see in the brutalisation of the Innocent One and his entry into the life of God a sign of the destiny of all. What happens to Christ in this paschal mystery is the sign and cause of what will happen to all those caught up in this history of wrong-doing, whether as victim or perpetrator. Until that completion, sin and evil-doing continue, and in the midst of all this, the Church's task is how to bring the light of that final condition of 'evil resolved' into a continuing condition of 'evil continuing' without under-valuing the scale of the evil and the pain of those crushed by it. I know of no more daunting spiritual and human task that we face.

Two final points should be made. Firstly, I want to evoke here, in relation to the pastoral care of victims and perpetrators, the strongly Catholic theme of sacramentality which extends beyond religious rituals to cover the Church's practical action towards all involved. What we do through treatment of victims and perpetrators, the networks of care and support, the provision of therapy for all those touched in these events, is a way of bringing into the present something of the completion that will come to us. I've pointed to the ways in which compassionate support for the victims and appropriate and constructive treatment of the offenders are ways in which we bring God's future resolution of evil into the present age, however imperfectly. What we do in this area then is what is meant in our faith by a sacrament: an active sign that conveys in a real way the actuality of divine love. What the Church has set in place through the Nolan Report seems to me deeply sacramental and expressive of the central mission of the Church.

It is not for me or anyone else to press people to forgive before they can. Those touched by these matters will know better than anyone how difficult it is truly to forgive: it is probably the most painful and intractable thing that people confront in their moral and spiritual lives, paralleled perhaps by the difficulty some people may have in truly repenting. We're not talking here about easy words of 'saying sorry'. Ultimately, however, we are not defined by the evil done to us nor by the evil that we do. Forgiveness for evil-doing is so hard to bring about that it takes the death of the Son of God to set it in motion and the presence of the Holy Spirit to sustain it. If Augustine

could say that without charity poured in our hearts by God we are radically unable to love, then in this area, I think, it is no less true that without divine grace we are radically unable to take ourselves beyond pain and the effects of malice in the human family. The clichés of 'moving on', 'putting it behind you' – so beloved of soap operas – do not touch the core of identity. Only God who is, as Augustine says, 'more intimate to myself than I am to myself', can touch the heart effectively. When forgiveness does occur, and when repentance too occurs, it is a share in the Risen Christ's victory over evil.

Let us also remember – because this is often misunderstood – that in the way it has evolved in the Church's history, the sacrament of reconciliation holds together judgement, mercy, repentance, amendment, restitution, conversion of life: it is not a celebration of easy forgiveness unrelated to justice and truth. We also need to acknowledge that Catholic Christianity slides too easily into the mode and rhetoric of forgiveness and can slide over the dimension of judgment. Have we forgotten that the first killer in the Bible, Cain, has the mark of God put on him by which God reserves to himself judgment on him and others who damage or kill others? God's love is a burning fire for evil-doers.

Secondly, some further comments on forgiveness. We ought to be disconcerted and made extremely uncomfortable by Christ's unrelenting insistence on forgiveness as an absolute necessity. The distinctive spiritual teachings of Christianity, compared with Judaism and Islam, are the teachings about love of enemies and forgiveness of wrongs. Earlier, I suggested that humanity is in a steady state, getting neither significantly worse nor significantly better. Now I want to suggest that there are sacramental actions that do advance the world towards its completion and its final meaning and those actions focus on forgiveness and reconciliation. I cannot see how human beings can handle these things without living in a horizon of hope offered by God and without taking steps to advance the human family towards ultimate reconciliation.

Hope matters in this area because without it, we would be in a position of seeing no way out of the history of repeated evil-doing and abuse. There is no redemption in Clint Eastwood's films, for example. *Mystic River*, that powerful film he made about child abuse, guilt and murder in contemporary Boston, and his great Western *Unforgiven* are narratives completely untouched by the possibility of hope and a resolution of human abuse. In these films, wrongs are not rightened, honest acknowledgement of the evil that's been done is not made, and unspoken and deep pain among victims persists. If history as a whole is 'unforgiven', if the final words written on our personal stories are those inscribed on us by the evil done to us and by the evil that we do, then Mr Eastwood and not Jesus Christ is right. And that cannot be: Christian hope tells us that the last word written on our personal and social histories will be the Holy Spirit inscribed in the hearts of all, effecting reconciliation and conveying a deep peace of which we catch only glimpses, now, in prayer.

In the 18th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel we have the first manual of Church discipline; significantly, it addressed the damage done to 'the little ones' by those who impede them or sin in relation to them. It is possible that these texts show that the abuse of children was a factor in the earliest Christian communities, although one cannot be sure. It is valuable to draw attention to the sequence of themes presented in this chapter. Having presented 'a child' to the disciples as the model of what a disciple in the Kingdom should be like, Jesus then turns to the issue of those who 'scandalize' or 'damage' or cause 'the little ones' to sin (the exact meaning is elusive):

> If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.
> Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! (vv.6-7)

Then, after an injunction to take radical action to remove the particular cause of sin in us (8-9), he speaks of the Son of Man coming to save those who are lost and of his searching out the one sheep that gets lost: who this 'sheep' is meant to be is identified as one of the 'little ones' (10-14). Then Jesus outlines a series of steps to be taken against 'a member of the Church who sins against you'; in this context, we are surely given to understand that the person and the sin involved has to do with the damage done by this person to 'the little ones', although it probably has broader application to other matters too. Jesus finally says that if the person will not listen to repeated efforts to make him see what is wrong, then the person should be expelled and ostracized by all. But then, having spoken with devastating power against sinners who offended seriously within the community, in vv.21-35 in response to Peter's question the climax of the Lord's teaching centres on forgiveness:

> "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

The presence of these final words on forgiveness in a chapter that threatens millstones, formal charges and legal procedures, ostracisation and exclusion from the community, is enormously important. It signals that forgiveness belongs within the dynamic of truth-telling, bringing things to light, the conduct of formal legal procedures, expulsion from the Church, and that the last word to be pronounced on all these things that must be said and that must be done flows from the spiritual burden of forgiving. The yoke of Christ that is laid upon us is forgiveness and love of those who do evil to us. The final reality that alone can heal all, victim and perpetrator alike, is forgiveness.

The Church rightly thinks of itself as mediating God's forgiveness to the world, but there comes a point in many people's lives when the burden of exercising forgiveness falls upon them and they are faced with whether or nor to forgive the Church for what has happened. The Church cannot press to be forgiven easily – genuine forgiveness is never easy and, as we have seen, is not to be separated from truth and justice – and it is to be expected that a modern equivalent of the Biblical rhetoric that 'millstones tied round necks' will be directed towards the Church. The Church will also find itself ostracized from people's lives, in a strange reversal of the situation envisaged in Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel. These are painful diminishments, consequences that follow upon wrong-doing, and we have to endure them. We need the virtue of hope to be strong in the lives of all.