

The Roman Catholic Church Investigation Report

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> [Executive Summary \(https://www.iicsa.org.ukexecutive-summary.html\)](https://www.iicsa.org.ukexecutive-summary.html)

Executive Summary

This investigation report examines the extent of institutional failings by the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales to protect children from sexual abuse and examines the Church's current safeguarding regime. It draws on evidence from the Inquiry's three case studies on Ampleforth and Downside Abbeys and their respective schools, Ealing Abbey and St Benedict's School, and the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

Between 1970 and 2015, the Roman Catholic Church received more than 900 complaints involving over 3,000 instances of child sexual abuse against more than 900 individuals connected to the Church, including priests, monks and volunteers. In the same period, there were 177 prosecutions resulting in 133 convictions. Civil claims against dioceses and religious institutes have resulted in millions of pounds being paid in compensation.

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It would be wrong, however, to regard child sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church as solely a historical problem. Since 2016, there have been more than 100 reported allegations each year. Across the entire period of nearly 50 years covered by this Inquiry, the true scale of sexual abuse of children is likely to have been much higher.

As we have said previously, faith organisations are marked out from most other institutions by their explicit moral purpose. The Roman Catholic Church is no different. In the context of the sexual abuse of children, that moral purpose was betrayed over decades by those in the Church who perpetrated this abuse and those who turned a blind eye to it. The Church's neglect of the

Throughout this investigation, we heard appalling accounts of sexual abuse of children perpetrated by clergy and others associated with the Roman Catholic Church. The sexual offending involved acts of masturbation, oral sex, vaginal rape and anal rape. On occasions, it was accompanied by sadistic beatings driven by sexual gratification, and often involved deeply manipulative behaviour by those in positions of trust, who were respected by parents and children alike.

Victims and survivors described the profound and lifelong effect of this abuse. One witness said “*the psychological effects have continued ever since, resulting in years of unbearable guilt, depression, nightmares, anxiety and PTSD symptoms*”.^[1] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference1>). Another victim said the abuse which he experienced at junior and senior residential schools affected every aspect of his life, and led to him self-harming. It “*nearly wrecked*” his marriage and “*destroyed my trust, not just in the church but in any authority*”.^[2] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference2>).

In another instance, a young boy estimated that he was abused several hundred times by a senior priest between the ages of 11 and 15 years. After each incident he was required to make confession, and the priest concerned made it plain that his sister’s place at a local convent school depended on his compliance.

Amongst the many convictions of priests and monks was that of Father James Robinson. In 2010 he was convicted of 21 sexual offences against four boys. When sentencing him to 21 years’ imprisonment, the trial judge said that Robinson had used his position of authority and total trust to commit “*the gravest set of offences of sexual abuse of children*” that were “*unimaginably wicked*”.^[3] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference3>)

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Another notorious perpetrator, Father David Pearce, was convicted in 2007 of indecently assaulting a boy aged seven or eight by beating and caning him on his bare buttocks. Pearce would smile as he caned him, and afterwards make the naked child sit on his knee. As a result of the abuse, the victim said “*he hated himself*” which built up and eventually resulted in him “*having a nervous breakdown*”.^[4] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference4>). His mother said:

“*His father and I live with the guilt of sending him to St Benedict’s, trusting a priest ... and the guilt of not realising why the change in our son was not more evident to us.*”^[5] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference5>).

The evidence in this investigation has revealed a sorry history of child sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales. There have been too many examples of abusive priests and monks preying on children for prolonged periods of time. Responses to disclosures about sexual abuse have been characterised by a failure to support victims and survivors in stark contrast to the positive action taken to protect alleged perpetrators and the reputation of the Church.

Child sexual abuse was swept under the carpet. Resistance to external intervention was widespread. Father Samuel Penney was a priest in the Archdiocese of Birmingham from 1967. Reports that he sexually abused children in the 1970s were raised with senior clergy on a number of occasions. He was moved from parish to parish. There was no internal investigation and the statutory authorities were not informed. Little thought was given to the victims or the risks that he posed to other children. The failure to act decisively when the allegations were first raised consigned other children to the same fate. It permeated the responses of the Roman Catholic Church with little accountability and sometimes active cover-up, until the Nolan report in 2001.

The Nolan report (2001) and the Cumberlege report (2007)

In 2000, Lord Michael Nolan was commissioned to review the arrangements for child protection and the prevention of abuse within the Catholic Church in England and Wales. His report, published in 2001, contained 83 recommendations applicable to the dioceses and religious institutes. At the heart of the Nolan report was the 'One Church' approach – a single set of principles, policies and practices across the Church that put the welfare of the child first. The first recommendation required the Church to “*become an*

open, honest and accountable institution.” [6] ([https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary/)

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As a result of the Nolan report, the Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (COPCA) was established. Its role was to provide advice and support to the dioceses and religious institutes, including on the implementation of the Nolan recommendations and the adoption of the 'One Church' approach. Some, however, did not behave in ways which demonstrated a wholehearted acceptance of this approach. The first Director of COPCA, Eileen Shearer, found some resistance to the changes by bishops and religious institutes, not least because of the misguided perception that the paramountcy principle of the child's welfare and canon law were “*diametrically opposed*”. [7] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#iicsaReferencesReference7>).

In 2007, the Cumberlege report was published, setting out the progress that had been made since the Nolan report. Much had improved over time. The report noted that 79 of the 83 Nolan recommendations had been addressed in full or in part, although religious institutes tended to lag behind in these developments.

Further structural changes were made. The National Catholic Safeguarding Commission (NCSC) was formed in 2008 to set the strategic direction of child protection policy and to monitor compliance. COPCA's name was changed to the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service (CSAS) to reflect its primary role in providing support and advice on safeguarding children and adults. Each diocese now had a safeguarding commission supported by safeguarding coordinators and safeguarding representatives in parishes and religious institutes.

Current safeguarding

The changes brought about by Nolan and Cumberlege resulted in improvements over the years. These included more formal handling of reports of child sexual abuse, better training for the clergy, religious and those involved in safeguarding, and greater cooperation with the statutory authorities. This is in contrast, however, with slower progress in other areas.

In May 2019, Cardinal Vincent Nichols said: "*We humbly ask forgiveness ... for our slowness and defensiveness and for our neglect of both preventative and restorative actions*" [8] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference8>). That slowness is

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overdue) and by its failure to establish the Safe Spaces joint project with the Anglican Church until September 2020. Six years have elapsed since this project was commenced and it seems little progress has been made to ensure that victims and survivors have access to the pastoral and therapeutic support that the Safe Spaces project was set up to provide.

CSAS audits in 2019 focussed on the management of safeguarding concerns and risk identification. While there was "*good evidence of cooperation*" between the safeguarding commissions and the statutory agencies in relation to the reporting of allegations, there remained concerns about the use of risk assessments and reviews of safeguarding plans. [9] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference9>).

[summary.html#licsaReferencesReference10](#)). That same year, the Diocese of Westminster described a victim of sexual abuse as “*manipulative*” and “*needy*” in internal correspondence amongst members of its safeguarding commission.^[11] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference11>). The Church’s contact with the victim was characterised by a lack of empathy and compassion.

Real and lasting changes to attitudes have some way to go if the Roman Catholic Church is to shake off the failures of the past.

Leadership of safeguarding within the Roman Catholic Church

Individual leaders in the Roman Catholic Church, as in other institutions, set the tone for how the organisation responded to the major issues with which they were confronted, through their words and deeds.

Across the Inquiry’s hearings on the Roman Catholic Church, weaknesses in leadership were significant in the failures to address child sexual abuse. The responses of Church leaders over time were marked by delay in implementing change as well as reluctance to acknowledge responsibility, to hold individuals to account or to make sincere apologies. They conveyed on occasions a grudging and unsympathetic attitude to victims. Failure in some of these areas contributed to more children experiencing actual abuse and many others being exposed to the risk of sexual abuse.

In the English Benedictine Congregation Felling Abbey case study, the current Abbot President (Dom Christopher Jamison)

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that ... I think individual abbots and the Abbot President have not, in the past, exercised sufficient authority and leadership. ^[12] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference12>).

In the Archdiocese of Birmingham, the Social Care Institute for Excellence report in 2018 found significant failings in safeguarding, and a need for “*radical culture change ... to professionalise the leadership, governance, management and delivery of safeguarding in the Archdiocese*”.^[13] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference13>). The Archbishop of Birmingham, Bernard Longley, spoke directly to victims and survivors in making his personal apology for what happened in Birmingham, and offering to find some way of “*lifting the burden*” for them.^[14] (<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/executive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference14>). The

As the figurehead and the most senior leader of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, Catholics look to Cardinal Nichols to lead by example. During the final public hearing in November 2018, he apologised for the Church's failings, noting that this was a source of "*great sorrow and shame for me and, indeed I know, for the Catholic Church*".^[16] (<https://www.iicsa.org.ukexecutive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference16>) But there was no acknowledgement of any personal responsibility to lead or influence change. Nor did he demonstrate compassion towards victims in the recent cases which we examined.

His acknowledgement that "*there is plenty for us to achieve*" applies as much to him as it does to everyone else in the Church. He did not always exercise the leadership expected of a senior member of the Church, at times preferring to protect the reputation of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales and in Rome.^[17] (<https://www.iicsa.org.ukexecutive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference17>)

The Holy See

In 2018 and 2019, the Inquiry asked the Apostolic Nuncio (the Holy See's ambassador to the United Kingdom) and the Holy See for information relevant to both the public hearing on Ealing Abbey and St Benedict's School and the final hearing on the Roman Catholic Church, held in late 2019. The Holy See is a foreign state and the Apostolic Nuncio's diplomatic status means that neither the institution nor the individual can be compelled to provide a statement to the Inquiry or to give evidence. Despite efforts by the Inquiry, very limited information was forthcoming. Much of the information that was provided was already in the public domain. After several months of correspondence, the Holy See belatedly confirmed it would not provide a witness statement. This response

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(<https://www.iicsa.org.ukexecutive-summary.html#licsaReferencesReference10>)

The Holy See's limited response on this matter manifestly did not demonstrate a commitment to taking action. Their lack of cooperation passes understanding.

Recommendations

to ensure that the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales has consistent and accessible policies and procedures for dealing with cases concerning child sexual abuse.

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