



THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR
SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN
IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

Briefing Paper

**Briefing Paper on a Report Commissioned by
the Focolare Movement in France into Abuses
Perpetrated by a Former Member JMM**

May 2022





THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR
SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN
IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

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About the Briefing Papers

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (National Board) was established to provide advice, services and assistance in furtherance of the development of the safeguarding of children within the Roman Catholic Church on the island of Ireland. The National Board also monitors compliance with legislation, policy and best practice and reports on these activities annually, as comprehensively set out in the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company, Coimirce.

Article 4 (iii) of the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company requires the National Board to: “ report and provide, upon request from the Constituents or any Constituent, support, advisory and training services to such Constituents or Constituent on policies and practices relating to safeguarding of children.”

The National Board already provides comprehensive Guidance to support the implementation of *Safeguarding Children, Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016*. In addition annually we produced Guidance, Advice and Practice (GAP) papers further complements the detailed Guidance on topics of current interest to constituents.

This development of Briefing Papers is envisaged to provide information contained in detailed research papers, journal articles, and inquiry reports relevant to safeguarding that we condense into a short digest format for ease of reference.

The Briefing Papers are the National Board's critique and assessments of key points and lessons that can be learned from externally written reports.

The views expressed are those of the National Board and should not be considered as a definitive position on the given topic.

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Background

Focolare is an international movement, officially known as the Work of Mary, and was approved by the Catholic Church in 1962. It is present in 182 nations and more than 2 million people share closely in its life and work. The Focolare Movement began with Chiara Lubich, in Italy.

“Inspired by the gospel, working for unity in all spheres of life and for the relief of any kind of poverty by promoting the life of the Gospel particularly the words of Jesus: whatever you did unto one of the least, you did unto me and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. By practicing and promoting a Gospel-based life and social projects related to it, for over sixty years the Focolare Movement has drawn together people from all Christian traditions and from many of the world’s religions, alongside people with no formal faith, who share the aim of building a united world”.

To achieve its goals, people of the Movement engage in dialogue and are committed to building bridges of fraternal relationships among individuals, between cultural groups and in every area of society. Members of the Movement include Christians of different Churches and ecclesial communities, members of the major world religions and people of no particular religious belief. Each one adheres to the Movement’s goal and spirit, while faithfully following the precepts of their own faith and conscience. At the heart of the movement are small communities of men and women who consecrate their lives to God with vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and live in separate households called “focolares”, from the Italian word for “hearth”. Married people are also members of these communities, while remaining in their families and being faithful to their commitment to marriage. They too make the same radical choice of the Gospel and offer their lives to bring unity in the world.

Focolare has branches in both the North of Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where members work with several groups of adults and youth.

Remit of Inquiry

In December 2020, Focolare France commissioned an English consultancy firm to look into abuses committed by a former member, JMM; highlight the context in which they occurred, and note reports with regards to other abusive situations.

The full report and a summary can be accessed on the website of the Focolare Movement in Ireland (www.focolare.org/ireland) which also carries the message of current President of the Focolare Movement, Margaret Karram, who writes: “This must not happen again and is in total contradiction with the values that the Focolare Movement with its Christian spirituality is called to live”.

The Independent Inquiry received credible and corroborating accounts, including JMM’s own admission of parts of the allegations, covering a period of more than 30 years (1963 – 1998), from various alleged victims, all males as well as other witnesses, both male and females.

JMM joined the Focolare movement in 1961/21. The Inquiry report suggests that the first case of abuse was noted in 1963, and states that there were 37 victims between 1963 and 1998, with further grooming behaviours up until 2017. The first victim came forward and issued criminal proceedings in 1994, this did not result in prosecution, but JMM was required financial reparation to the victim.

In 2002 another victim reported his abuse to the Ecclesiastical authorities in Paris who in turn asked Focolare for a report. The President of Focolare asked for a discussion with the victim, but there is no record of that having happened or any follow-up to the concerns.

In 2009, the new President of Focolare was informed of the concerns about JMM.

In 2015, another member of Focolare realised that JMM was still in contact with children.

In 2016, with the intervention of the Archdiocese and the Vatican JMM was released from his vows and asked to leave the Movement.

The object of the mandate given by the Focolare Movement to the Inquiry team was to achieve the following general objectives:

1. To carry out an investigation into the sexual abuses committed by JMM, reviewing the details of known offences, the context in which they occurred, and highlighting others that may come to light.
2. To establish, as far as possible, the degree of knowledge of these events by the persons responsible at the time and subsequently, and assess how they were dealt with by the persons responsible, in the light of the historical periods concerned.
3. To provide recommendations on current child protection arrangements - for Focolare in France and more generally for the whole Focolare Movement - including reporting and response systems and, in particular, case management.
4. To draw up within a year a public report detailing the findings and recommendations of the commission of enquiry.

After more than 15 months’ work, conducting 99 interviews and 130 hours of research, exchanging 1500 emails, the Inquiry team published the report of its findings and recommendations in full.

Process of Inquiry

The Inquiry team received direct testimony from 26 victims of JMM, either through direct contact and verbal testimony or through documented third parties. An additional 11 victims were suspected and subsequently reported through different means and triangulation but with no further contact or confirmation. The Inquiry received testimonies from 3 young people subjected to a grooming process, without any subsequent abuse. These additional reports on grooming concern incidents up to 2017.

The team also heard concerns relating to JMM involving emotional abuse, financial abuse, and spiritual abuse.

Findings

- All of the reported abuses took place under conditions the Independent Inquiry labels as ‘psychological hold’.
- In addition to the grooming and manipulation of the children, JMM created a conducive environment in which to approach the children and adolescents by also grooming their parents.
- JMM was also successful in grooming his own organisational management which for years, had some knowledge about the situation.
- Targets of JMM seemed often to have been children from poorer backgrounds, living in the countryside or in decentralised regions, coming from families with a number of children and less able to dedicate individual time to each of them.
- JMM provided them with “exceptional memories which were not necessarily open to them without invitations from him”.
- JMM, consciously or not, incited some adolescents to some sort of competition, to be the selected one, the favourite child.
- JMM committed a number of abuses under the roof of parents who trusted him, who had invited him, who were convinced of his superior morals given his status as a consecrated lay person who had committed his entire life to the Movement, to poverty, chastity and celibacy.
- In some cases, JMM seemed to have linked his behaviour to spirituality, praying for forgiveness after the abuse took place. Such behaviour added emotional abuse to the sexual abuse. Such relationships are characterised by significant imbalances of power, whereby the alleged victims feel deprived of their free will or does not fully apprehend events.
- Victims not only suffered abuse by JMM but were also victims of systemic failures within the Focolare Movement.
- For a long time, victims of such situations felt guilty for not having pushed back, for not having been brave or strong enough to prevent the abuse.
- JMM was highly regarded by other members, as an intellectual, an engineer, a journalist; somebody who was successful in his job, committed to the Movement, a consecrated member having dedicated his life to serve the Movement of Chiara Lubich, of whom he was seen as being a close friend.
- The Focolare Movement, spent years using legal concerns and resolutions as a defence, making the excuse that because an abusive situation has not been proven via a legal process, it could somehow be ignored and managed without acknowledging the victims.
- JMM benefitted for years from a system protecting him; at the same time, the Focolare Movement systemically failed the victims.
- The Movement itself contributed to the guilt felt by victims, considering that once the legal responsibility was not confirmed, it was not their responsibility either to protect future other victims from JMM or to actively trace back other victims who had not come forward with their stories. JMM for years was left in the same position of authority and potential abuse of power.

A victim remembers that when he told his story to the people in charge at the International Centre, they seemed to be so bewildered by his story he felt strongly that what had happened must have been his own fault.

- Most of the victims or witnesses reporting other cases of sexual abuse within the movement were concerned about the lack of diligence; were concerned about Focolare reporting to national authorities; as well as a level of opacity when cases were dealt with and perpetrators expelled.
- It appears that negative experiences which were reportedly lived inside the Movement, contributed in some cases to further weakening the self-confidence of those concerned and allowed further abuse through different forms.
- Many layers of people including at the highest governing level, were informed about the fact that ‘something was wrong’ with JMM and he needed to be kept under surveillance. However, the people most in charge, both in France and internationally, at the time the case of one victim came into public view via the court cases in 1994/5, remained satisfied there had been a legal process that resulted in a non-lieu and did not take any further formal action.
- It is highly unlikely that the highest level of Leadership was not informed about the legal issues JMM encountered in 1994 – 1998, then again in 2017. JMM had been in police custody in 1994 and members of the Movement had been called upon to testify. In addition, as already established, JMM needed the Movement’s help to pay the financial reparation he was condemned to pay to the victim in 1998. As the amount was very significant, such a payment must have been authorised at the highest level of the Movement. The Independent Inquiry has established that Leadership at the Centre authorised this payment in 1998 and therefore, must have been informed about the facts.
- The people initially responsible for JMM many years ago are now deceased. Others, in charge later, have consistently failed to act on information based on a mistaken or misguided belief that the court case verdict meant they could not move against JMM or out of fear of the consequences or self-preservation and an avoidance of reputational damage.

Conclusion

The Independent Inquiry found systemic failures in the handling of the JMM case and established that a chain of people in charge over many years, both in France and in Rome, failed to act on the situation of JMM in a way that would have protected victims and prevented other incidents of abuse or attempted abuse.

Following recommendations by the French Church, Focolare has referred possible abuse victims to an independent commission established by the Conference of Religious of France to support them.

Recommendations

The Report states that “Victims require recognition of their suffering as a core expectation”.

The report proposes actions and developments that are strongly recommended as part of the continuing safeguarding journey in the following areas:

- Culture and leadership
- Prevention measures - policy and procedures, learning and development
- Response measures - reporting and responding
- Monitoring and review.

Apologies

The Independent Inquiry found systemic failings in matters relating to JMM and therefore recommended the Focolare Movement make a genuine, profound and unconditional public apology to his victims that recognises the Movement failed to protect them and others from abuse that could and should have been prevented or detected.

Redress/Compensation Scheme

The Inquiry suggested that the compensation mechanism should be independent of Focolare, operated in a transparent and efficient way by a third party organisation or body made up of suitably experienced individuals independent of Focolare. The panel should include individuals from a mix of professional backgrounds, for example legal/judicial members and non-judicial members from e.g. psychologists, social workers. Settlements should be offered as quickly as possible and applicants should have the right to appeal.

Other Victims

The Report suggests that Focolare should now address the needs of other victims and develop a strategy for how to follow up on all the other cases.

Post Script

The Report suggests that the Focolare Movement has taken significant steps to change the situation in relation to the protection of minors and notes further developments being planned. This includes a strong commitment from leaders to ensuring the Movement is a safe place; learning from this Inquiry; and ensuring improved safeguarding practices going forward.



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