



**National Conference-Hillgrove Hotel, Monaghan
11th and 12th May 2022
Opening address by Garrett Sheehan-Chair on 12 May 2022**

Any words , even introductory ones such as these on the topic of Child Safeguarding in the Catholic Church in Ireland require the greatest care.

In 2019 Pope Francis wrote a public letter in which he addressed the suffering caused by clerical child sexual abuse. He expressed deep sorrow for the heart wrenching pain of victims and gave voice to the shame of the Church.

Writing in Thinking Faith the online journal of the Jesuits in Britain, James Hanvey SJ said that this letter marked a definitive moment in the Church's life. He pointed out how Pope Francis emphasised the deep wounds of pain in the victims and in the Church arising from sexual abuse perpetrated by priests , bishops and cardinals and had asked for a profound transformation of hierarchical and priestly culture. This was a task that Pope Francis said could only be accomplished by the whole people of God.

James Hanvey tells us that the first work of a church genuine in its desire for conversion and repentance is to listen which he says is often the hardest task of all.

Reminding us that the testimony of those who have been abused will now always be part of the Church's identity he also says the following : ' To analyse , categorise and bureaucratise the testimony of anyone who has been or is being abused is another act of violence. Their unique history is translated and retold in other narratives that they no longer control. Their voice is lost , their face made anonymous. If the Church really cares and desires to change then it must listen to and honour each abused person. It must give space and time for only then can it begin to hear, within the history of each person's suffering what has been taken from them and all those down the years who have been hidden. Abuse is not just one moment or even multiple moments of violence, manipulation, deception and subjection. It enters the soul as well as the heart and mind. It is a rupture in the self and the fundamental sense of security on which identity depends. Abuse even when buried still has the power to hijack, destroy and undermine a life. It cannot be easily or conveniently 'healed 'because the life of the person. — their identity and confidence in themselves and their relationships — is always under threat..'

Now I think it is fair to say that we in the Irish Church today have moved on from that place where the Church whatever its motives colluded with abusers to try to silence victims and hide the truth. We are gradually getting to the point where the suffering of the abused is beginning to be central , where we are asking ourselves what this suffering is calling us to. We are asking what are the profound lessons that those who have been abused are teaching us and what are the responses we need to make.

These questions are emerging not least because of the work of the Irish Bishops and religious orders who are our sponsors but also because of the sustained work of our CEO Teresa Devlin and her team as well as the work of all of you delegates attending this



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conference. In addition, this is not to forget all the volunteers working in this area throughout Ireland. All of you are helping to make the Church a safe place for children and young people.

We are also realising the great debt we owe those abused people who have spoken out of their deep pain and told us what happened to them. And we need to remember here those who have been unable to speak up, those who have died, those who have taken their own lives. All these people who have ended up on the margins of our society are challenging us in one way or another to interrogate our faith in a much deeper way ... asking us if we are really serious about the faith we say we profess.

One response that we must make to this is to incorporate in our liturgy the suffering of those who have been abused. In this regard, we must avoid any kind of tokenism which would only make matters worse. This suffering requires to be acknowledged in a formal way and on a regular basis. It would bring the safeguarding notice on the door of the Church to the heart of the liturgy and surely contribute in this way to the promotion of safeguarding. The Norwegian Bishop Erik Varden writing last November following the publication of the Suave report in France had this to say :

To be a Catholic today is I would say to live within a huge unclean ulcerating wound that cries out for healing. Who is claiming this wound he asks ?

He says that there is an immense work of bearing to be done in the Church today and that that bearing has to be done by all of us. He says that this bearing consciously and freely assumed by all in the Church is a precondition for healing. Bishop Varden acknowledges the seriousness that victims call us to when he challenges us about the renewal we need and the fundamental issues that we face. He goes on to ask what is the Church without this interrogation. A humanitarian coffee morning he asks rhetorically. An excellent enterprise on its own terms he says but hardly something that renews our lives, kindles our love, fortifies our hope, purifies our joy and forms in us courage and peace. Strong words from Erik Varden prompted by his reading of the Saue Report. And lest we lose sight of what we are talking about he begins with the testimony of Catherine :
'I am for life, a dead woman alive. At the age of sixty-six I am so utterly empty that I find it hard to find words to rise up in revolt against you.'

All of us working in this area of child safeguarding need help from wherever we can get it. One person whom we might not immediately think of looking to for help is Sigmund Freud. Again we can thank Pope Francis for prompting us to have a look in his direction. In an interview in 2017 he spoke about how he had been helped in the 1970's by a Jewish woman in Buenos Aires who was a Freudian psychoanalyst. He spoke about visiting this woman in her home on a regular basis to get help with difficulties he was experiencing at the time.



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There appears to be a tendency to decry Freud in contemporary Irish culture largely it seems by those who either have not read him or are put off by popular misconceptions or misplaced fear. The English poet W.H.Auden eases our path to Freud. When Freud died he wrote a poem entitled In Memory of Sigmund Freud. Here are some lines from that poem:

*For about him till the very end we're still
And shades that still waited to enter
The bright circle of his recognition
Turned elsewhere with their disappointment
As he was taken away from his life interest
To go back to the earth in London
An important Jew who died in exile*

Freud's work points us to a way in which we can grow and develop as human beings so that those things which we fear the most can when articulated work towards supporting us in what Freud himself referred to as the life force that is in all of us.

We do indeed need to thank Pope Francis for pointing us in the direction of Freud.