

Why An Apology For The Innocents?



*We respond to the suffering caused by religious sexual abuse of victims and survivors –
“The Innocents”*

We are ordinary people who know there are many victims and survivors – “the innocents” - of sexual and other abuse committed by those in the Catholic Church and in other religious communities. It is the suffering of these people and their need for and right to healing that compels us to raise our voice.

Daily these innocents carry the legacy of criminal actions committed by perpetrators in positions of authority and power. Additionally, their awful suffering was then compounded by their subsequent treatment at the hands of some of the hierarchy and church officials. Those transgressions are just as serious, given the breach of trust those officials held in the name of us all, and despite the message they purport to proclaim.

Those sinned against once trusted the hierarchy. They believed their pastors would listen carefully to them tell of their betrayal and suffering and thus care for them, their families and local communities in their trauma and see to their healing. They also believed the offenders’ superiors would take all steps necessary to deal with the perpetrators and protect other innocents from them.

But how is the reality perceived today? Many trusting souls are now scandalized. They see the message of Jesus being trashed - his message of love. They see the image of the church being trashed as leadership becomes compromised and self-serving. Morality too is trashed - a thing to be declared but far from obvious in this situation as responsibility and transparency are neatly sidestepped. Official apologies have been met with widespread incredulity.

So what can we ordinary people do? Can we stand up and reaffirm the Jesus message of love? Can we attempt to do what our leaders currently seem incapable of achieving? Can we confidently contribute to the healing of those whose need is largely hidden yet so deep and great?

We, as ordinary people, can apologise to the innocents, their families and friends for the gross burden of betrayal, hurt, isolation, and unwarranted guilt they may have had to carry as a result of sexual or other abuse by Catholic clergy, religious teachers or workers.

Yet there are good priests and bishops who strive to support those in need. One can imagine the anguish they feel as they try to pick up the pieces in a ravaged parish. Moreover, they become unfairly tarred with the opprobrium due to the perpetrators. They need our support for their good work.

But a note of caution! While we begin with a desire to apologize to the innocents, it is easy to be diverted into the necessary reform of the ‘big’ system with its many elements. With injustice of this magnitude arousing our desire for retribution, many emotions emerge, not the least anger. In that battle for justice and reform, the feelings and needs of victims and survivors can be overlooked. Rectification, however good we feel about it, is not an apology.

Yet as we consider what to do, we reflect on that moment of feeling overwhelmed and speechless as we attempt to speak to a victim/survivor. How can one express what one feels? How can we say we are thinking of them and their burden as they stand there in what they experience as utter aloneness? What can be said to those who have learnt to survive?

With all this in mind, we have created an apology for victims and survivors, the innocents. It is an apology we make as ordinary people to the innocents among us, to their families and community. We want this apology to be experienced as a sincere attempt to let them know we are with them. Their suffering, their need for and right to healing also compels us to make a public gesture of sorrow for what has happened.