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Our burden to be shared

The people of Dublin have been traumatised by the Murphy Commission's report on how the Church dealt with child abuse in their diocese. Last week the former Master of the Dominicans spoke to the diocese's clergy about the trauma. Here is part of what he said

Child abuse is a terrible crisis for the Church, not just in Ireland, but in Britain, America and Australia. But I am convinced that it is through crisis that we may grow closer to God. It is a crisis caused by our own failures as a Church, but God can make it a blessing, if we live it in faith and grasp the moment.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). In the past couple of weeks most of you have probably been feeling pretty heavy laden. You may be weighed down with the burden of the scandal of abuse; with the failure of many bishops to face this over decades. You may feel crushed by the anger of the press, the anger of some parishioners, and perhaps even worse their sad, sympathetic disappointment. Whenever I give lectures in England these days I come away exhausted with the anger against the Church.

How can we bring this to the Lord so that he can take the weight off our shoulders? Well, he says, "Come to me, all you that ... are carrying heavy burdens." *All you*. That means that we come to him together with all of those who are weighed down. We have to go to him with those who carry the heaviest burdens of all, the abused. If we are to grow closer to Jesus, then we have to help them with their burden. That looks like an additional burden, but eventually it will take a weight off our shoulders too.

I admit that I am afraid. I fear the anger and the hurt of those we have abused. When I hear them talk on the radio or television I can barely cope. I want to turn it off. But friendship with the Lord implies that we must stagger along, somehow, bearing their burden, and their anger and their hurt – and the disappointment and sorrow of the people of God, and even the heavy burdens of our fellow priests who abused minors. If we carry each others' burdens, then the Lord will give us rest.

One way in which we can rest is by throwing off the heavy burden of being righteous. It is so tiring having to pretend to be a saint all the time. Again, Jesus says: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29, 30). Unlike the Pharisees, the yoke of Jesus is light.

If we think about our beloved Church in

recent centuries, we do seem to have been more like Pharisees, laying heavy burdens on the shoulders of the people. Often this has been associated with sexual behaviour. We have told families with large numbers of children that no contraception is permitted, and young people who cannot afford to get married that their sexual behaviour must be strictly controlled, and gay people that nothing is permitted – and that they should be ashamed of their sexuality. Regardless of the rights or wrongs of church teaching, this has been experienced by our people as a heavy burden.

And then they discover that some priests who have been weighing them down have been sinning sexually in a far more grievous manner – like the Pharisees, not practising what we preached. You can imagine the anger of a woman who has had child after child and can cope no more, or a young gay person, when they hear what even a few priests have been up to.

That anger is all the more exacerbated because paedophilia has become the sexual sin. In a secular society like England, there

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really aren't any others any more. So all the disquiet and anxiety about sexual behaviour – the sense that something is going wrong – becomes focused on the paedophile. He or she is the great sexual sinner, the only sinner. I do not want in any way to play down the seriousness of the offence, which is indeed horrible and inexcusable, but to help understand the degree of intense anger. Sexual abuse of minors is, I suspect, the lightning rod for all our anxieties about sexuality and about how it seems to have become detached from any moral vision.

But we need something much more radical than kindness. We need a renewed understanding of what it means to bear the yoke

of Jesus' commandments. We have to challenge this idea that morality is mainly about prohibitions and obligations – the idea that being good is a matter of submitting one's will to the great policeman in the sky is mistaken.

Jesus revealed his new commandment to the disciples on the night before he died, at exactly the moment that he claimed them as his friends. "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15).

This explains something really puzzling about Jesus. He ate and drank with prostitutes and tax collectors; he had the most disreputable friends. He did not wait until they had repented before he invited them to the table. He did not say, "Look Joanna, once you have been off the street for a week, you can come to my party." He accepted them as they were. And yet he preached the Sermon on the Mount. He commanded his disciples to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies, to never be angry, to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. He is very demanding.

How could he do both of these, be unreservedly welcoming, apparently lax, and yet at the same time be very demanding? The exigencies were those of God's friendship. It is only in the visible context of friendship that we can give moral teaching.

This realisation has radical consequences for the way in which the Church teaches a moral vision. What we have to say only makes sense in the context of friendship. If we want to speak on questions like abortion, or divorce and remarriage, or the gay issue, then we must be seen to be the friends of these people.

So this yoke of Jesus' is easy and his burden is light because it is the offer of his friendship, and it can only be communicated in friendship. Indeed, what is to be said can only be discovered in friendship. It is only side by side, sharing the struggle and the search, that we will be given the right Word. And this Word can never be a burden, only a gift.

"Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). This brings us to the question of power in the Church.

(To be continued next week.)

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