Suicide and Survivors of Clerical Child Sexual Abuse

Thursday 5th September 2013 is the anniversary of the second tranche clerical child sexual national audit reports and the launch of the World Suicide Prevention Week. Minister Kathleen Lynch TD, Minister for Disability, Equality, Mental Health & Older People will launch three reports at the opening event. The reports to be launched are: National Office for Suicide Prevention Annual Report 2012, NSRF National Registry of Deliberate Self Harm Annual Report 2012 and The Second Report of the Suicide Support and Information System.

As a campaign survivor of child sexual abuse by members of the Spiritans or Holy Ghost Fathers, I am mindful of the failures of this congregation to address my needs and those of others survivors and their distraught families with whom I am in contact. I have been told by the Acting CEO, Ms. Teresa Devlin of the National Board for Safeguarding Children that she has received update reports from second tranche participants which once processed will be published later this month.

There is a connection between these events and it is a very tragic and important one. There has been no study or report generated into 'completed suicide' and survivors of clerical child sexual abuse. Despite numerous studies and reports linking clerical child sexual abuse, and child sexual abuse in general, with attempted suicide and self-harming, there is a lack of research and survey into 'completed suicide' in Ireland so as to better understand the nature of the problem and the high risks taken in pursuit of justice and redress.

The figures on suicide rates for survivors of child sexual abuse are hard to find and those that are make for lamentable reading.

In September 2010 it was reported in Belgium that 13 victims committed suicide attributable to clerical child sexual abuse (The Irish Examiner - Saturday, September 11, 2010[1]).

In September 2012 it was reported in Victoria, Australia that 40 survivors of clerical child sexual abuse allegedly committed suicide triggering a Parliamentary inquiry which found 620 more cases of child sexual abuse committed by the Catholic clergy. (The Australian, September 22 2012[2]). The final parliamentary report will be issued on 30th September 2013 (http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/fcdc/article/1788[3]).

[1] http://www.irishexaminer.com/world/belgian-clergy-abuse-blamed-for-13-suicides-130542.html
[2] http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/victorian-catholic-church-reveals-620-abuse-cases/story-fn3dxiwe-1226479509933
[3] http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/fcdc/article/1788

In Ireland cases of suicide directly related to clerical child sexual abuse are more difficult to find because of the lack of research and study to date.

In 2004 Paul Dwyer[4] committed suicide when the DPP decided there was insufficient evidence to convict his alleged abused Fr. Bill Carney who was extradited by a London court back to Ireland in May 2013 to face 34 charges of child sexual abuse[5].

In April 2005, Anthony Delaney[6] committed suicide. "Mr Delaney was among the former inmates of residential institutions whose case have been dealt with by the Government-appointed Residential Institutions Redress Board" according to Ben Quinn of the Irish Independent.

In October 2010, in a report conducted by Mary Higgins for the St Stephen's Green Trust, entitled, "Developing a profile of survivors of abuse in Irish religious institutions[7]", it was cited that "*One person reported that of 39 co-residents in his class, 17 had committed suicide since discharge*." I have heard anecdotal stories from other survivors and former inmates of from Irish residential institutions who claim they know of reports of 33 survivors of residential abuse who committed suicide.

In December 2011, the Cloyne Report[8] was published in full. Earlier in July 2011, Paul Cullen of the Irish Times reported "two people attempted suicide[9]." At the same time, Michael Brennan of the Irish Independent reported details of the 18 priests against whom allegations were made but none were convicted. A priest by the name Fr. Moray is mentioned as having sexually abused a brother and sister. The brother is recorded as having committed suicide.

In June 2012, Paul Daly[10] (whose case was conjoined with mine in a successful prosecution of Fr. Henry Moloney by the DPP in March 2009) was believed to have died prematurely[11] as a result of his child sexual abuse.

In September 2012, it was cited in the second tranche reports by the National Board for Safeguarding Children prepared by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC)[12], that "The suffering of victims has on occasions

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[4] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8556659.stm
[5] http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/sex-abuse-priest-extradited-to-face-34-charges-here-29242962.html
[6] http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/liffey-suicide-is-latest-victim-of-abuse-to-die-25992185.html
[7] http://www.ssgt.ie/files/developing_a_socio_economic_profile_of_survivors_o.pdf
[8] http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Cloyne_Rpt
[9] http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0714/1224300713979.html
[10] http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2012/0906/1224323653661.html
[11] http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2012/0620/1224318257389.html
[12] http://www.safeguarding.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Missionaries_-of_-the_-Sacred_-Heart_-MSC.pdf

caused them to engage in self-harming. There is a record of one young man who died by suicide where it is noted in the files that the abuse that he suffered was seen as a contributing factor if not the main cause of his death."

This information in Ireland indicates more than just the statistical data of 55 confirmed or alleged suicides in Ireland as a result of clerical child sexual abuse but it also tells the extent of the tragic stories and ruptured lives caused by the aberrant members of the Catholic clergy who perpetrated and facilitated such abuse. Indeed in seeking redress there is no 'risk assessment' conducted regarding any litigation procedures outlining the dangers posed to survivors in seeking justice and redress.

The SAVI Report[13], March 2002, page 220 states: "It was decided not to interview prisoners directly for this study. The reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, there are concerns regarding asking prisoners to disclose a history of sexual abuse in an environment where they spend many hours of the day alone and do not have the support of family and friends to deal with emotions raised in this way. The risks of damaging their well-being, including self-injury and suicide, are by no means insignificant. A second ethical concern is about conducting such sensitive research with a vulnerable and captive group without being in a position to provide services to deal with issues that might emerge from the interviews."

If SAVI Report researchers considered interviewing Irish prisoners directly was risky then why should any survivor especially one with a conviction against one of his perpetrators assume any further indignity and abuse carrying such high risks in any judicial process. Survivors are not an experiment no more than a prisoner in Ireland and the evidence is publically available to show the procedure of a hostile interview is wholly unnecessary if not irresponsible, professionally unethical and a violation of one's dignity. How can justice be served by such injustice and evident harm towards any survivor of the criminal offence of child sexual abuse?

Ireland needs to take note of events in the legal system in the United Kingdom as reported in the Telegraph in August 2013[14] where greater protection for child sex abuse victims has been called for following a case where a judge and prosecutor were criticised for describing a 13-year-old as 'predatory'. In another case, "proceedings had to be halted after the 17-year-old took an overdose of pills following her first day in the witness box" where she faced a gruelling session where she "was cross-examined by ten defence barristers representing the men from High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, who faced multiple counts of rape and other child-sex offences" as reported in the Telegraph in August 2013

[13] http://www.drcc.ie/media1/savi-report/
[14] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/10227085/Greater-protection-for-child-sex-abuse-victims-after-girl-described-as-predatory.html

also[15]. The most serious incident noted in the same article which demands calls for changes in legal procedures in the handling of child sexual abuse cases involves Frances Andrade, a talented violinist. In January 2013[16] she took her own life after being called a liar and a fantasist in court by the barrister defending Michael Brewer. He was later convicted of abusing her when she was a teenage music student and he was her choirmaster.

The legal arena poses enormous dangers to witnesses and plaintiffs and is crying out for reform. Survivors are processed in a manner by the legal system which clearly inflicts violations to their dignity in unsympathetic, unethical and immoral practices representing real and present dangers to their wellbeing and life. It is perverse to seek justice and be a victim of injustice by the very process involved. Suicide, attempted suicide or self-harming are an unacceptable consequence of legal process. Indeed would a judge put his own child through such an arena carrying such unquantified and unqualified 'high risks'?

There are such conflicts in suicide causality. Suicide is a complex phenomenon and generalisations for what in the end is a very specific action, crossing over from ideation to act, from thinking to doing, from life to death. Dr Tony Bates is attributed with saying "people reach the point of taking their own lives when they feel desperately trapped by their particular circumstances and can see no possibility of escaping their predicament and no likelihood of rescue" but he was equally shocked when he wrote in the Irish Times, 1 December 2011, about Kate Fitzgerald, "when someone such as Kate, who to her peers had 'so much going for her', and to her mental health professionals had so many 'protective factors' in her life, her death by suicide came as an even more painful shock."

In 2006 we read in the Irish Independent article by Donal Lynch, "Suicide is the dark side of our great wealth". Six years later we read in the Irish Examiner article by Dan Buckley that "Suicide rise is linked to economy, says study" which found that "suicides among men in Ireland rose sharply as the economy went into severe recession." In Europe it was noted that Ireland and Greece, the two countries that experienced the most severe economic downturns, also recorded the largest increase in suicide rates — up 15% in Ireland and up 17% in Greece at that time.

What brought me to ask questions about suicide and clerical child sexual abuse was out of my own personal experience. I've stood on the edge, past any line of suicide defence or prevention and met a monster. Suicide is a dark moment where your thoughts and feelings are arrested by one solution to a life that

[15] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/10224527/Teenager-giving-evidence-against-sex-gang-accused-attempted-suicide.html

[16] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/02/08/violinist-frances-andrade-suicide-sex-assault-trial-brewer_n_2646644.html

holds not one strand with the living. You've had enough of the torment and the only solution to the anxiety of future is to let go of this life.

The complex rupture and consequences to one's life is complete through an initial childhood violation denied and diminished by perpetrators and those who facilitated them within the religious life. There is no safe space left in your mind.

You don't have dreams, just escalating anxieties which are consequences of that initial rupture whether in family, relationships, friendships, employment, financial obligations, mental or physical health, the list is far better documented in a recent report, published in February 2013, entitled 'The long-term effects of child sexual abuse[17]', written by Associate Professor Judy Cashmore and Dr. Rita Shackel of Sydney Law School , which I think might help all understand the complexities of the comorbid disorder with life-long consequences victims of child sexual abuse are dealing with from research conducted over nearly four decades.

People can no longer say they don't understand or know what the significant and considerable consequences are of child sexual abuse in light of so many reports. However these reports have yet to see the light of day in my estimation.

The SAVI Report[13], March 2002, page 202 states: "Recent work shows that child sexual abuse is among a set of adverse experiences linked in a strong graded manner to adult psychopathology and suicide (Dube et al., 2001)." The SAVI Report[13] clearly refers to the Journal of the American Medical Association survey by Dube et. al. 2001[18], indicating the real and present danger for survivors of child sexual abuse, and not even the more serious offence of clerical child sexual abuse, where there is anything from a 2 to 5 fold increase in the risk of attempted suicide accepted by the Irish psychiatric fraternity from the American survey. This would also mean parasuicide increases by the same factor as does self-harming.

Despite this there is not one survey into the rate of suicide amongst this identified vulnerable group of survivors of clerical child sexual abuse. The suicide rates in Ireland for 2012 run at just under 2 suicides per day according to CSO figures whilst another 34 attempted suicide according to the National Registry of Deliberate Self Harm Ireland[19]. On 24th July 2013, the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre noted in its Annual Report for 2012[20] that only 3 cases of rape out of 322 known actually succeeded in a criminal conviction showing that the crime of rape in general has less than a 1% chance of a conviction for 2012. In

[17] http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/papers/a143161/cfca11.pdf
[18] http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=194504
[19] http://www.nsrf.ie/reports/Reports_2012/2011NRDSHReport.pdf
[20] http://www.drcc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/DRCC.AR_.2012.pdf

terms of clerical child sexual abuse I noted in my article in the Journal.ie that of the 16 dioceses reviewed to date by the National Board for Safeguarding Children, there have been 164 allegations made in relation to 85 priests where there have been no convictions[21]. This represents a third of the church authorities examined where not one priest was held to account.

Parasuicide figures applied to suicide figures differ from one country to another, e.g. Ireland is a factor of 20, U.S.A. is a factor of 25 whilst Australia is a factor of 30 on reported national suicide figures. In Ireland Parasuicide figures are around 12,500 regarding presentation in our hospitals noted in the National Registry of Deliberate Self-Harm Ireland[22].

Dr. David Lisak author of a 1994 study "The Psychological Impact of Sexual Abuse: Content Analysis of Interviews with Male Survivors[23]" wrote to me recently saying, "*From an epidemiological perspective, when you have demonstrated significantly higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation in a subsample of the population, you can logically infer that actual suicide rates will follow*." What surprises me is that the question of an identified subsample of the population noted in numerous studies and surveys as having higher risk of suicide such as noted in the SAVI Report from 2002 that there has not been a study to confirm this anywhere, yet everyone believes it to be true. Might it be because if such a study were to prove it were linked then there would be enormous social, judicial and medical implications and consequences? It might not be in the interests of the political and religious establishments to consider such a liability perhaps.

Society however must not shirk such a responsibility to such a vulnerable group especially where it is clear to what danger they are actually being subjected having been so intimately violated from such an early age. Are we not judged by how we treat the least amongst us? There is reason to believe you know someone who was sexually abused as a child only you may not know it. Opening up such debate depends on 'safe space' and 'trust'.

I have written to the Minister for Children, Ms Frances Fitzgerald in the hope that she would consider the need for the services to survivors of clerical child sexual abuse which I am calling for. I am only looking for two services, 'Rescue Services' and 'Safe Space Provisioning' to counter the suicide ideation identified in a group of Irish people wholly undeserving of any further neglect from childhood by our State.

by Mark Vincent Healy (markvhealy@gmail.com), delivered on Thursday, 5th September 2013

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[21] http://www.thejournal.ie/readme/catholic-child-abuse-187-allegations-against-98-priests-have-led-to-zero-convictions-883536-Apr2013/

[22] http://www.nsrf.ie/reports/Reports_2012/2011NRDSHReport.pdf

[23] http://www.davidlisak.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/InterviewswithMaleSurvivors.pdf