

Public Apology by Fr Martin Kelly
Provincial of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit
(Holy Ghost Fathers)

A review in 2012 by the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland revealed the stark reality of abuse perpetrated by 48 members of the Irish Spiritans over a 50-year period; that number has now reached at least 77. A decade ago, the then Provincial, Fr Brian Starcken C.S. Sp, apologised unreservedly to those abused, hurt, or damaged by any Spiritan.

On the initiative of a group of past pupils from Blackrock College a pilot Restorative Justice programme was established that has revealed further histories of abuse in our schools and the horrifying impact this has had on some of our past pupils and their families, friends and the wider community. We acknowledge that its effects have lasted a lifetime, with many still struggling to cope with it. This abuse took many forms: physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual. It was committed by members of the Irish Spiritans and lay staff in its schools.

It is clear from this pilot Restorative Justice programme that there are many more past pupils who were abused and who have not yet come forward.

We have listened to the experiences of several of our past pupils as they courageously revealed the trauma which they suffered. Many thought they were the only ones abused. It is clear that this was not the case; they were not alone.

Some of those who suffered reported the abuse and were not believed which served to exacerbate their plight. Many reported having difficulty forming stable relationships. Others reported that it had shattered not only the foundations of their religious beliefs but those of others as well. All those damaged by the abuse grieve its effects on them.

I want to take this opportunity to say the following:

On behalf of the Spiritan Congregation in Ireland, I want to express my deepest and most sincere sorrow to every person who was abused by a member of the Spiritans, or by a staff member, in any of our schools. I sincerely apologise for this. What was done to you as innocent children was cruel and indefensible. We are deeply ashamed of these actions.

Secondly, failure to act promptly resulted in children being abused who could have been protected had corrective action been taken earlier. I also acknowledge that failure on our part and apologise for it.

I want to encourage anybody who was abused by a member of the Spiritans or a lay member of staff in our schools, at any time, to come forward and contact us. I want to go further; any notion that those who suffered were 'weak' in some way and share some element of blame for whatever happened to them is completely and utterly wrong. As the leader of the Spiritans in Ireland today

I want to banish any such idea and promise all victims that the full process we're announcing today wants to hear from you. It is being led by an independent expert in the field, Mr. Tim Chapman, who has worked successfully on other such programmes and with those involved in the pilot programme already completed.

I would like to assure everyone that there are in place, and have been for many years, all the appropriate policies and procedures for the safeguarding of children in all Spiritan schools to ensure, as far as is humanly possible, that such abuse will not happen again to children in our care. We would like to assure everybody that all our communities apply rigorous standards for child safeguarding as laid down by the Child and Family Agency (Tusla), the Department of Education and Skills, the Catholic Church in Ireland, and the Congregation's own policy.

We always cooperate with the statutory authorities (An Garda Síochána and Tusla) in their investigation of any reports of abuse that we receive. I would ask anyone who wants to engage with this programme to contact the Restorative Justice Facilitator, Mr Tim Chapman. Tim can be contacted at Tim Chapman info@timchapman.eu My sincere hope is that anybody who has been abused while in our care will ask for and receive the help they need.

The Spiritans, through our Safeguarding Office, are committed to helping victims of abuse by providing access to counselling and other support services, as well as the Restorative Justice programme. Mr Liam Lally of the Spiritan Safeguarding office can be contacted at liam.lally@spiritanplt.ie

We owe a deep debt of gratitude to the group of past pupils from Blackrock College who took the initiative to approach us two years ago and who've worked patiently with us in the interim, in the process showing great care and concern for their fellow past pupils.

Martin Kelly C.S.Sp.

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