

Solicitors say Catholic Church is incapable of stopping abuse and must be called to account

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A group of solicitors representing victims of child abuse by clergy have written a letter to *The Times* (17 January) saying that the Church is still covering up crimes by priests and is incapable of policing itself. They call for a full public inquiry not only into the Catholic Church but also into the Church of England. *The Times* is paywalled so we are reproducing this letter here because we consider it too important to be overlooked:

"As lawyers working on behalf of children and vulnerable adults who have suffered sexual and physical abuse in institutional care, we write to call for a public inquiry into abuse within church organisations in England and Wales.

Officials of church organisations hold influential and highly respected roles within the community; historically they have enjoyed both the trust of the public and unquestioned access to children. This has undoubtedly created extensive opportunities for abuse. From cases we are handling currently, we are aware of some 41 Catholic priests who have been convicted of serious sexual offences in the recent past. Yet these very same organisations, particularly in the Catholic Church, have persistently ignored and in many cases covered up complaints of abuse.

We have seen clear evidence of cover-ups on some of our cases and we believe these are the tip of the iceberg. The culture of cover-up has been embedded in the Catholic Church for decades if not centuries. It will never be effectively challenged without full public scrutiny, something which only a public inquiry, with powers of access to documents, including each Catholic diocese's secret archive, can achieve.

The Church of England has similarly been criticised for a lack of transparency. The available evidence shows that the practical implementation of new safeguarding policies in both the Catholic Church and the Church of England (and indeed in other denominations) has been tentative, patchy and has met significant institutional resistance at senior levels in the church hierarchy.

There is now overwhelming evidence that religious organisations are too compromised by their own failings to police themselves effectively. The only way to address the scandal of sexual and physical abuse in these organisations is through a comprehensive public inquiry, and we urge ministers to order this without delay."

[Richard Scorer, Pannone Solicitors](#); David Greenwood, Jordans Solicitors; Tracey Storey, Irwin Mitchell Solicitors; Jonathan Wheeler, Bolt Burdon Kemp Solicitors; Malcolm Johnson, Malcolm Johnson & Co Solicitors; Alan Collins, Verisona Solicitors; Tracey Emmott, Emmott Snell Solicitors; Peter Garsden, Abney Garsden McDonald Solicitors

But in response, the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, was [reported](#) as saying this week:

"It is important that the church is given the opportunity to take this forward in a way that can ensure that victims' feelings and concerns and pain are more than acknowledged - used as a spur to prevent this sort of thing happening again."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, who has campaigned on this issue at the United Nations Human Rights Council, said: "Mr Gove ought to realise that the Church has been given multiple opportunities to get its house in order. As these solicitors – who, after all, are at the coal face of this scandal – have pointed out, the Church has repeatedly shown it is incapable of policing itself and an independent inquiry is the only way forward."

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