

Catholic hierarchy stand by while nuns' orders seek to obstruct justice for their abuse victims

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Following the failed attempt to obstruct the historic child abuse inquiry in Scotland, Keith Porteous Wood exposes the continuing reluctance of the Catholic Church to face up to and pay for its crimes.

Two orders of nuns have sought and failed to frustrate the appointment of the chair of the Scottish child abuse inquiry. Maybe they hoped no one would notice their shocking record of heinous abuse and ponder on their motives. As could be expected from the Scottish Catholic hierarchy's brazen and disgraceful record on denial and covering up abuse, it conspicuously did not distance itself from the appointment challenge.

A clue emerged when the Scottish Government appointed Susan O'Brien QC to lead its public inquiry into historical child abuse, which will have powers to force witnesses to give evidence and has committed itself to ensuring that abusers "face the full force of the law".

For some reason, two orders of nuns, the Congregation of the Poor Sisters of Nazareth and the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent De Paul, [challenged Ms O'Brien's appointment](#), alleging fears of "apparent bias" on the flimsiest of grounds. The QC had acted for her clients only at a very late stage in a case brought against the Poor Sisters of Nazareth to argue a point of law. For these reasons, a judge dismissed the nuns' challenge and Ms O'Brien will continue to lead the inquiry.

Nuns certainly have their uses, whether or not they are doing the bidding of the Church hierarchy. They managed to convince the Irish Government to indemnify them from what would have been a €1.2bn compensation debt over child abuse for a mere 10% of that sum, costing Irish taxpayers over €1bn that they should never have had to pay.

As the [Irish Independent](#) put it: "Two nuns held a pair of deuces while the most experienced minister in the Government folded a full-house in a winner-takes-all game of poker with the Catholic Church." And it is likely that [little of even the paltry proportion promised was actually paid](#) despite what was later revealed as the [massive wealth](#) of the religious orders.

The expertise of the nuns of these Orders in Scotland is also evident on the very subject of the Inquiry.

Sisters of Nazareth ran homes in Tyne, Sunderland, Plymouth, and Manchester in England, Swansea in Wales, and in Scotland - Aberdeen, Glasgow, Midlothian and Kilmarnock. One of the 500 complainants against both orders said that Sisters of Nazareth "nuns regularly beat him and made him witness the violent degradation of other children" and that he is still being haunted by images of nuns "banging [children's] heads against the walls of the dormitories" in one of their orphanages in Aberdeen in the 1950s. Helen Cusitor said a named nun "would force-feed you your own vomit. That started from the moment I went in there."

Yet fast forward 11 years and we find the Sisters of Nazareth, so keen for that QC not to lead the Scottish Inquiry, [had confirmed to its Northern Ireland counterpart](#) that the children were made to eat their own vomit, were physically and sexually abused, and were known only by numbers rather than their names. The Order also confessed to withholding letters from children's families.

"[The Order] recognise the hurt that's been caused to some children in their care. They apologise unreservedly for any abuse suffered by children in their care. They go forward hoping that lessons will be learned, not just by them in the provision of care but also by carers generally in society and in wider society at large."

And the Scottish criminal justice system appears to support the abusers and fail the victims. A Nazareth nun "Sister Kevin" who had sexually and physically abused a victim escaped prosecution despite 30 witnesses being prepared to give evidence against her, ["because of her age \[80\], her infirmity, and the length of time that has passed"](#).

As for the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent De Paul, whose name changed from the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent De Paul – readers can conjecture why – they are best known for the unmarked graves of up to 158 children who died while living at Smyllum Park in Lanark. These graves lie in mounds at St Mary's churchyard in the town.

One victim told of the "sadistic, sick, mental torture" in Lanark. Another of "a face full of hate, an angelic, holy face turning into a face of horror, a woman crunching her teeth in hate, going berserk, screaming while you are pleading for mercy, the wee leather boots just booting into you. Bruises go away, but the horror stays in your mind."

The Catholic Church's spokesman, the 'Sexfinder General', Monsignor Tom Connelly, had his secretary explain to the *Big Issue* in Scotland: ["It's nothing to do with us any longer"](#). And, ten years on, [no compensation has been made to victims](#).

The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul are to pay €10million, 3% of their assets, and said they "unreservedly apologise to anyone who was abused and hurt while in our care as children".

The orders remain in business, looking after the elderly – hopefully with better care than they showed their young charges decades ago."

How sincere these apologies were can be judged by these "charities", who with wide publicity sought to compound their abuse of victims by obstructing the Inquiry, to no signs of objection from the Scottish hierarchy or the Vatican. [Fortunately they failed.](#)

There are many Catholics in Scotland including clerics and members of orders there that are doing selfless work. No doubt the level of child rape and abuse by Roman Catholic clerics and those in religious orders has substantially diminished from the horrific level of fifty years ago, even in Britain, never mind Ireland, where the level of reported abuse per capita was the highest in the world, as far as we know.

With the huge publicity over clerical child abuse and some improvements in child protection, the Church must realise that it is much more likely now than in the past to have to pay financially for such abuse and risk prosecution of both abusers and those who facilitated them in the criminal courts. Quite apart from being the ethical thing to do, putting their house in order is also very much in their financial self-interest.

But the Scottish Catholic Church's attitude to these tens if not hundreds or thousands of heinous crimes of the past (at least) which ruined the lives of its victims, many still alive, [could hardly be](#)

[worse](#) even to this day.

And this deeply ingrained and long-standing cruelty in the Catholic Church in Scotland is not confined to Orders, it appears to go to the top of the episcopal structure and infect it.

Take Thomas Winning who became a bishop in 1971, and who soon after becoming a cardinal in 1994 angered Scots by asserting that it was [up to the victim, not the clergy, to inform the authorities of criminal allegations](#).

Take also for example his successor, Mario Conti, a bishop since 1977, formerly Scotland's most senior Catholic, and now Archbishop Emeritus, who went as far as to [accuse the former Nazareth House inmates](#) of being seekers not of justice but of "pots of gold". He even denied "either in the context of confessional or outside the confessional, [receiving] any complaint of any kind of abuse relating to the care of children in Nazareth House". Carefully chosen words; he notably didn't say he wasn't aware of it.

Given that the episcopacy does not have control over religious orders, the presumption must be that the nuns did not act on "orders" from the episcopal hierarchy, although as we see above, the hierarchy is happy to go out on a limb to support an Order.

Following the conviction of a Nazareth nun for cruelty, Conti, ["rejected a claim that he sought to protect the interests of nuns and priests above those of children"](#) and resisted calls, including one from (now Sir) Malcolm Bruce when he was a Scottish LibDem MP, to apologise for the Church's role.

Take further Keith O'Brien, who became a bishop in 1985 and was, as a Cardinal, Britain's most senior Catholic. The Pope removed him from the archepiscopacy in 2013 and forced him to leave Scotland for, among other things, forcing those under his control to submit to his homosexual advances. It is not clear whether this was also because of something much more serious; he ["blocked an independent inquiry into cases of clerical sexual abuse covering 60 years"](#).

Despite all this the Pope allowed him to remain a Cardinal, setting very publicly on behalf of the Vatican a very high bar for permitted, probably criminal, misdeeds being no impediment for remaining a cardinal. Not that Francis would be the first to do this. [Cardinal Law](#), who fled to the safety of the Vatican from Boston, was one of many.

Abuse victim James McDermott wrote to O'Brien's successor as Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh, Leo Cushley, and his assistant replied: "While the archbishop sympathises with your situation, he regrets that he is unable to assist you." The victim concluded: "New face, same old song". A former adviser to the Church, Alan Draper, who has been outspoken and has now been sacked by them, [and is not the only investigator to leave in similar circumstances](#), described the Church's current position as "window dressing yet again. They have learned nothing." Victims and whistle-blowers alike are fought mercilessly to this day at every turn by the hierarchy.

Even since Francis was appointed as Pope, lawyers tell me that the Church throughout Britain continues to fight all criminal cases and claims for compensation tooth and nail.

Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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