

IICSA's Ealing hearings showed the Catholic Church can't be trusted to police itself

Posted: Mon, 25th Feb 2019 by [Keith Porteous Wood](#)

An inquiry has highlighted the Catholic Church's lamentable failings over child abuse at an abbey and school in west London. Keith Porteous Wood says the episode has shown the need for mandatory reporting of abuse.

(Unless otherwise indicated, text in quotation marks comes from evidence given to the inquiry.)

This month the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) heard evidence over the abuse of children at Ealing Abbey and the adjacent St Benedict's School in west London. The hearings took place as part of the inquiry's investigation into Benedictine order establishments.

The hearings have become a case study exposing the many systemic obstacles to safeguarding of pupils in the English Benedictine Order (EBO) and the wider Catholic Church, in no small measure as a direct result of control imposed by the Vatican.

I pay tribute to all the victims/survivors of clerical abuse in Ealing, and particularly those, including parents and staff, who courageously spoke out or attempted to do so. The vast majority of the staff have not abused pupils and will be horrified by it. One pupil described the school as providing "a fantastic academic education" even though the abuse to which he was subjected ruined his life.

Extent of abuse

Serious abuse of pupils that was not reported to the civil authorities has been found in every EBO school in England and the outlying one at Fort Augustus, remote in the Scottish highlands. Fort Augustus has since been closed, having been described in a BBC documentary as a "[dumping ground' for problem clergy who had confessed to abusing children](#)".

Abuse reported to the Ealing Inquiry included "excessive physical chastisement - sometimes apparently for sexual gratification, grooming; fondling of genitalia; anal penetration; and rape".

Lawyers believed that "since World War II... hundreds of boys were molested at St Benedict's". "Monks had been behaving this way at the school for 60 consecutive years to 2010. ... [I]t was part of the culture". Given this and the Inquiry alone learning of 66 allegations, it is plausible that thousands have been abused there since the foundation in 1902 of the school dubbed "[one of Britain's most notorious dens of paedophilia](#)". Notably, "at Ealing, the sexual abuse was perpetrated by those at the very top of the organisation", for many decades. This meant abuse could be perpetrated with impunity which also "turned St Benedict's into a honeypot for other [abusers]".

And collateral damage frequently included family breakdown. Most of those parents prepared to stump up such fees to send their offspring to this Catholic school run by the prestigious Benedictines were almost certainly ardent Catholics. Accusations of such misconduct by the venerated monks will have been met with disbelief, counter accusations of mendacity, huge family rows, estrangement and even disinheritance especially for those who later pressed civil or criminal

claims. Numerous victims have been driven to [seek solace abroad in an attempt to escape their memories.](#)

One of the worst offenders was David Pearce. He had joined the monastic community in 1969 and had been head of the junior school from 1985-1993. Since then, for good reason, "he has had no unsupervised access to children", and purportedly was permitted to work only in the small adjacent monastery. Yet, he was not jailed until 2009, while still at Ealing.

Evidence was presented of him kissing a pupil on the lips, masturbating in front of pupils in class, demanding to be masturbated by a pupil and being infatuated with one for 11 years. He touched "hundreds" of boys' "buttocks and genital area[s]". A pupil said Pearce fondled his penis. There were similar incidents with pupils in the infirmary. Pearce also openly filmed pupils showering.

Pearce's activities must have been known to everyone. When Pearce took swimming the boys described the lessons as "gay days". He was widely known as "'Gay Dave' to the students and, according to abbot [Martin] Shipperlee, also to the teachers". One victim said "Pearce seemed to actually revel in this description, [regarded then by pupils as] a reference to Pearce's sexual interest in prepubescent teenage boys." Several monks had known this since the 1970s and there had been "Graffiti: Father David is bent", surely alerting everyone.

Yet it was not until 2006 that "a successful civil claim [was brought] against the school [in respect of Pearce]. It was fought all the way to trial and ... resulted in a damning judicial indictment of both the school and Pearce". That typically heartless fight to avoid paying compensation will have been made in the knowledge of the truth of the claim. Despite even this damning indictment, Shipperlee, who had immediately followed Pearce as headmaster, allowed him to remain on the Ealing site, notionally subject to restrictions. MS claimed it was "best for [Pearce] to remain amongst his community... the problem with sending him away is to find a place that will be suitable and acceptable". Shipperlee admitted to the Inquiry that he may well have said of Pearce "'What can I do? He is my friend". Pupils' best interests hardly seem a consideration for Shipperlee, or for all but a few teachers and monks.

The purported restrictions on Pearce's movements were not even promulgated in writing and in any case were unworkable, given the school and monastery shared the same site. As Shipperlee admitted: "You can't be with them 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and, in my experience, especially with sex offenders, they will do anything to get around any restrictions that are placed upon them".

There had been numerous accusations over decades and opportunities to prosecute had been missed, almost thrown away. Despite this staggering litany of criminal misbehaviour, Pearce was not arrested until 2008. He initially pleaded not guilty to offences against five boys, but the following year he was jailed for five years. "He is alleged, or has been found, to have sexually abused at least 14 pupils at St Benedict's School ... from September 1976 to January 2008."

Another senior abuser was headmaster John Maestri. According to one witness, he was "well known to host boys at his [nearby] apartment at weekends". The witness added that Maestri had kissed him on the lips and embraced another child "as if the child was a long-lost lover".

Following "allegations in 1984" Maestri left with "a positive reference to apply to become a teacher" and – clearly with a further helping hand – was taken on by a part of the University of Oxford which reportedly has strong links to the Benedictine school, Ampleforth – how convenient. In 2003 Maestri was sentenced to 30 months. How was it that he escaped further prison sentences on additional charges which he later admitted or was found guilty of? In one case his sentence was

suspended, in another he was allowed to serve a community sentence, and for some reason, a victim withdrew other charges.

Probably the worst was Father, later Abbot, Andrew aka Laurence Soper. This former pupil with a career in finance behind him joined the Abbey from "1964 and was ordained in 1970, teaching at the school between 1972 and 1982". This abuser was recently jailed for 18 years after 5 years on the run. It was on 19 counts.

"He sexually abused at least ten ... pupils between 1975 and 1983". One victim was "caned by Soper about once a fortnight ... with such force that black and blue welts were left". The inquiry said it was "clear that there was a sexual element to the beatings".

Evidence was also presented of a young offender at Feltham YOI stating that "he had been subjected to a series of sexual assaults, at least 30, by Soper over a six-month period. The abuse escalated and he said that Soper raped him in his cell on at least ten occasions."

All that horrendous abuse, surely no secret, was not the slightest obstacle to him being meteorically promoted. First to abbot in 1991, a post he held until 2000, then after a year as an army chaplain to be appointed "treasurer of the Benedictine Confederation" in Rome.

The abuse at Feltham was later "brought to the new abbot, Martin Shipperlee's attention, but not pursued"; we heard of much similarly questionable behaviour by MS during the hearing. Revealingly, the offender "said that he discontinued the case at the time because pressure had been brought to bear upon him by solicitors acting for Ealing Abbey". Might this give us a clue about how Maestri miraculously evaded further behind bars? The abbey and school certainly look after their own.

Soper showed not an iota of remorse for the lives he had ruined, callously pleading not guilty to all charges and therefore subjecting his victims to giving evidence and being cross-examined, compounding the abuse they had suffered. At the Old Bailey he decried his conviction as a "[miscarriage of justice](#)".

Not mentioned in the inquiry was a headmaster of the middle school in the 1970s, Father Kevin Horsey, who [was notorious for inviting boys to sit next to him during PE lessons and openly fondling their genitals](#).

Too many other masters or monks were involved in abuse over the years to mention.

The dissenters: brave pupils and a suicide

Given the foregoing, it will come as no surprise that pupils courageously trying to obstruct fellow pupils being abused faced dreadful consequences. This obstruction could be achieved by creating a commotion where abuse was being perpetrated, for example outside the door. An abused pupil testified "[R]efusing these men led to being singled out for official school punishments on various pretexts, usually made up, and also extracurricular punishment: being beaten up by the coterie of boys who hung around Pearce, Maestri, Soper. Each master/cleric, lay or clergy, had their own coterie of boys. As I've said elsewhere, these were boys who might be past their sell-by date sexually, but were still under the spell of these predators. ... we are talking about football-hooligan-level violence, we are talking about serious beatings in the street on the way home." This was on top of "official punishments -- canings on all sorts of made-up pretexts; detentions; being marked down; being thrown off school sports teams".

He alleged that one of their tactics, which he had been subjected to, was to feign a theft by a pupil. Given the level of fees charged, the likelihood of pupils stealing others' minor belongings seems pretty remote. In his case he was falsely accused by one of Pearce's coterie of stealing a raincoat but offered no proof. "Pearce and Soper turned this into a witch-hunt and, over the course of an entire term they conducted a campaign of harassment. They incited other boys. They got everybody believing that I was the raincoat thief. And this culminated in a sort of a show trial organised by Soper and Pearce together, in our classroom, with me as the accused and Soper and Pearce as the accusers and a jury of my peers".

Fortunately, in this case "an end was put to it by ... one of the handful of good monks in the school, ... who ... ordered the whole thing to be dropped." The next pupil referred to was less fortunate.

"[Y]ears later , I heard about the case of this other boy who'd put a Gat gun in his mouth and caved the roof of his mouth in -- it took him weeks to die -- he's been accused of stealing a tennis racket. I heard this story during the Pearce trials, and I knew it had to be true. It was the *modus operandi* I remembered."

This pupil "the most beaten, the most caned boy in the school" was asked how he reacted to his treatment: "I think I died inside, to be honest, somewhere around my mid teens. I became very cold."

Staff raising concerns also did so at their peril. A member of staff raised concerns about Pearce bringing pupils into his office, locking his door and covering over his internal office window. Abbot Laurence Soper (maybe unsurprisingly given what we now know of him) claimed that "the allegations against [Pearce] were unfounded" he "just liked little boys" and had been moved from the junior school because he was "a sick man". The then headmaster responded to the raising of these concerns with "If you know what's good for you, keep your head down and do your job". Another teacher testified "I made complaints about both Pearce and Maestri, but they didn't go anywhere and it definitely harmed my career. At times it felt like the Mafia [a point made by numerous witnesses] . When Cleugh became head, I attempted to make him aware of past issues with Pearce and others. He did not welcome this."

The role of the Vatican and its nuncio (ambassador)

The inquiry has wide powers of subpoena. In December it had requested information including a copy of the unredacted report of the Vatican investigation into Ealing. This was made to the Vatican through a number of routes including the papal nuncio (ambassador). The sovereign state invoked diplomatic immunity. The information was not forthcoming despite a number of exchanges with the nuncio in which he seemingly declined to act as a conduit. This did not go down well and further pressure was applied. In its closing minutes, the inquiry learned that the nuncio had not received the requested information from Rome. The inquiry has informed me that it is now in possession of the report.

Metropolitan Police evidence implied that the Vatican Bank had withheld the address of Soper on the run from the police. Whether or not it did so at any stage, according to [The Tablet](#) on 17 April 2019 Soper's arrest resulted from information disclosed by the Vatican as a result of Soper's "suspicious" request to transfer money to a bank in Kosovo.

Some of the lawyers' reactions are quoted below.

The abbot's dramatic resignation

Shipperlee, Ealing's abbot for nearly two decades, was a member of the working party implementing Nolan for the Benedictines, and reportedly was so familiar with safeguarding that he was bored with it. This laid back abbot's bumbling evidence to the inquiry was painful to watch. Under cross-examination, he frequently had to correct himself, and admit appalling errors of judgment, to describe them charitably.

Probably the last straw was Shipperlee admitting that he had failed to inform the police about a serious claim of abuse against Soper, despite undertaking to do so at the request of the child protection officer (CPO). Shipperlee sought to justify this failure on the grounds that he thought the claim to be "spurious" ostensibly because he "had a very high regard for" Soper, his predecessor. This does not quite square with Shipperlee having already responded to the CPO's same request by warning the army unit of which Soper was chaplain. Tellingly, Shipperlee did not tell Soper of the accusation, and it is plausible that a contributory root cause of the catastrophic continuation of the abuse for so long has been Shipperlee's self-confessed "failing" to "challenge people". How plausible is it that in his decades living on site at Ealing 24/7, Shipperlee had not heard sufficient accusations against Soper to have little doubt about their veracity? Shipperlee's total failure to enforce safeguarding at Ealing was laid bare.

Within hours of being cross examined at the inquiry, he resigned.

The church/abbey's child protection officer

There was no dedicated child protection officer (CPO) working on the Ealing site, an obvious symptom of the safeguarding catastrophe. The CPO was primarily working for the diocese, and this generated predictable problems over remits and responsibility/ownership.

The CPO for the abbey when much of the above occurred seemed from his evidence to be casual, to say the least. Record-keeping was not his strong point and he was unable to answer numerous important questions with any certainty. At the time of the successful civil action being brought in 2006 against Fr David Pearce he did not even read the judgment which contained, as would be expected, a mine of important information. Despite the action being successful, the CPO disturbingly described the successful plaintiff as a "victim" in quotation marks in a letter to the local authority's deputy child protection manager. How objective do these actions appear?

The CPO and presumably the abbey and school had a close relationship with the police. Could it have been too close? The CPO was asked whether he would have expected to be informed by the police of them having "obtained corroborating evidence from other boys". He responded: "We had - I had a good working relationship, especially with Sergeant Morgan and, you know, I would have expected to be told things like that."

Justice and regulatory bodies

The primary contributory factor to so much abuse escaping criminal sanctions for so many decades was of course the school's failure to report it, and the "mafia" culture preventing others from doing so.

The second factor, however has been the police. The commander representing the police giving evidence was asked "Do you consider that there may have been a failing in drawing the strands together of the amount of alleged abuse and actual abuse that took place at Ealing Abbey and St Benedict's School?" He admitted: "I think we could have done much better... yes." Similarly, the inquiry's chair asked the commander about what she described as the "piecemeal approach to the 66 complaints that were made over several years".

Numerous individual accusations had not been pursued because they did not individually stand up – unsurprisingly, there were no witnesses to the abuse. Too often, the police did not look out for similar accusations in the past and/or question members of staff or others who might have been able to provide corroborative evidence. Aggravating factors were intelligence not being shared between different forces, records being much less accessible than now and insufficient relevant experience of investigating officers. The five year Europe-wide search for Soper, for example, was not handed over to specialists in international matters for several years.

And prior to that he was not even on the international database. Was this incompetence or was it worse? I am reliably informed that Soper's former fellow monks at St Anselm's Benedictine HQ in Rome had made suggestions about where Soper was hiding. Maybe the police should be asked whether they ever enquired.

The commander held out the hope of significant improvements in performance in future. This could be expected as a result of much better, nationwide, computer systems; work being concentrated in specialised teams not tied to one police force; and a greater willingness to collect evidence more widely. He cited one called Operation Winterkey as an exemplar. I can confirm this as senior officers from that operation have approached me in connection with their inquiries over clerical abuse.

Questions were raised about the thoroughness of the CPS, and of the information given to it, particularly in potentially promising cases where prosecution was not recommended. The extremely basic searchability of their computer system and short term document retention policies were questioned.

Victims' lawyers were rather more blunt. They considered that "victims and survivors" had been "failed" because of "an apparent mixture of deference to these men of cloth and so-called reputable schools" and "ineptitude and avoidance of heavier workloads". Sadly, over the years, I have seen such "deference". It is not unknown for wayward clerics to make it their business to charm those who could hold them to account.

The shocking evidence of one member of staff of the local authority was "On Monday, 15 June, I contacted Father Pearce and told him of the allegation made against him" despite "social services [being] advised not to inform [the] suspect of the allegation until the statement was taken". The inquiry was advised that this, as could be expected, ran "the risk of tainting any evidence that may be obtained from the suspect". She apparently did not believe the allegation; we do not know whether anyone encouraged her to come to this conclusion.

The role of the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) does not seem to have been very effective, albeit I accept that the information provided to it by the school was selective, at best, and much of the abuse had taken place before it was formed. The ISI even withdrew an inspection report in 2009 because of "failings so significant", with an inspector complaining about not having been told about a great deal of relevance.

The then headmaster maintained throughout the cross-examination that he had not been secretive, but had on numerous occasions to apologise for omissions and inaccuracies. This included the failure to report on one occasion matters to a regulator concerning David Pearce. He sought to pass this off as "an unfortunate oversight" but, clearly irritated at the reaction, changed this to "well, it was a huge mistake, then".

Information sharing between regulatory bodies has been a major problem. "In 2009, the police, the Charity Commission and the local authority had information relevant to the work of inspection, but

the systems in place at that time didn't lead to it being passed to the ISI or the [Department for Education]. " [It] knew nothing about failings at the school until alerted by blogger Jonathan West, despite the criminal convictions of Pearce and Maestri. It makes clear the complete helplessness of the Department for Education in the face of an independent school which does not prioritise safeguarding." "[T]he Department for Education lacked the power to require Ealing to remove abusive monks from the abbey."

The summing up by victims' lawyers

A lawyer for victims says they reject as "incredible" the claim that the monks had "no grounds for suspecting their brethren". This was not a few "rotten apples" – the English Benedictine Congregation (EBC) is a "rotten institution". "As long as the EBC is engaged with the care and education of children, the EBC poses an unacceptable risk to children. The EBC themselves acknowledged this by sponsoring a conference which explored how elements of Catholic culture, including its theology, might enable abusive behaviour."

Similarly, the EBC abbot president asked "what is it about the Catholic culture that seems to have facilitated abuse and a lack of addressing abuse?" A lawyer answered: "The reputation of the church and the protection of its clerics will be put first to the detriment of victims... the preservation and the reputation of the community will always be the first consideration."

The lawyer continued, spelling out the wider consequences: "This is not an approach which would be permitted to exist in any other organisation. We ask that the Catholic Church is not given any deference in this inquiry process. In relation to structure, the opaque and Byzantine structure of the Catholic Church is a significant barrier to child safeguarding. All institutions within the church are bound to follow canon law but are otherwise independent from each other. Another canon relates to the obligation to avoid scandal. So in theory, an abbot who is less than candid to the authorities about child abuse can be seen to be acting within the principles of canon law. The purpose of these canons is not to protect children, but to protect the church and the faith."

"[The] Catholic Church cannot be trusted to police itself." "[The] inquiry cannot defer to a closed procedure in a foreign sovereign state and this is an important point: the safety of children in this jurisdiction must be determined by legislation in the United Kingdom. We ask you to recommend that child safeguarding policies must be set against accepted objective civil norms, not on the basis of antiquated and inward-looking, faith-based codes which are regulated from overseas."

A suggestion that canon 'law' needed reform or was not the be-all-and-end-all was sensibly dismissed as "the triumph of hope over experience". "In simple terms, it comes down to this: which law is supreme, that of the UK parliament or that of the Catholic Church? This inquiry perhaps can arrive at an answer to that question."

Victims' lawyers were united in calling for the introduction of mandatory reporting (MR) of known and suspected institutional child abuse, without exceptions for the confessional. It was asked why MR exists for dirty money, but not child protection. If it had, "hundreds of those boys wouldn't have been abused". As Jonathan West said: "Mandatory reporting would make it almost impossible for a long-running situation, such as occurred at St Benedict's, to happen."

"The creation of a law [was recommended] to embody mandatory reporting as advocated by the knowledgeable pressure group, Mandate Now, the creation of a statutory body with powers to police and enforce basic standards of child protection. We envisage a body similar to the Health and Safety Executive." Leading abuse lawyer Richard Scorer, coincidentally an NSS vice president, endorsed this: "As we have long argued, that means that MR is essential and indeed this

case study demonstrates precisely the need for mandatory reporting, given the length of time, particularly, over which abuse in this school without action being taken." All victims' lawyers endorsed this view. Only the Benedictine Order sat on the fence.

Recent events and the role of blogger Jonathan West

The latest conviction, once more of a senior master, is [Dr Peter Allott](#), jailed in 2016 for possessing nearly 400 obscene images of children (found in the school but not of Ealing pupils) and class A drugs to which he had become addicted. He was deputy headmaster and had been teaching there since 2004. Allott's conviction makes it rather harder to claim that such abuse is solely a historic problem.

Most telling of all was that until recently, the school fought shamelessly with all its tenacity to retain the ability not to report abuse complaints to civil authorities where parents or pupils did not wish to do so. Why the intransigence? Could those parents who believed their children and complained to the school be dissuaded from raising this with external agencies by empty promises that matters would be resolved internally? And if they were good Catholics could they be persuaded that they should not want to do anything that would cause scandal to the church?

I brought this anomaly up at a well-attended press conference to present the results of an inquiry, and the BBC took up the point when interviewing the head. We were both fobbed off. As a lawyer later told the inquiry: "As Jonathan West said, the right policy [i.e. without this exception] could have been put in place in four weeks rather than four years. ... The fact that it eventually happened is a tribute to the efforts of campaigners [particularly him]. The fact that it took [him] four years and was never suggested either by the Carlile Report or by the visitation confirms, in our view, the inadequacy of both and the inherent unsuitability of self-policing."

That was not the only drama on the day of the press conference. A lawyer testified that "on the very same day, you have a survivor of the kind of abuse on which the report focused being threatened by a member of [headteacher] Cleugh's staff in the street near the school". He quoted the survivor: "While I was being interviewed, a car appeared and mounted the pavement, narrowly missing the cameraman. The doors flew open and a man I subsequently learned was a teacher at St Benedict's leapt out, accompanied by a shaven-headed security thug, and started ranting and raving about trespassing on school property [which it was not]." The inquiry learned that a complaint to Mr Cleugh about this did not even elicit an explanation, far less an apology.

Mr West also pointed out tenaciously numerous serious shortcomings to the school and to regulatory agencies. All too predictably, as one witness testified: "Ealing regards Jonathan West as public enemy number one". The head insinuated in a prize day speech that West and other campaigners were "part of an anti-Catholic movement linked to the papal visit".

We need to remind ourselves that from late 2009 onward people came forward as a result of the publicity whipped up by Jonathan West's blog, and this probably contributed to the convictions both of Soper and another teacher. One lawyer's evidence concluded with the words: "Let us not leave it to individuals like Mr Jonathan West to have to put the world to right."

Conclusion

The school, abbey and regulators would have us believe "that was then and this is now", but it is difficult to be convinced with any confidence that abuse could not happen again on a significant scale. The above section on recent events reinforces my scepticism.

Despite wide knowledge of the abuse and numerous complaints, procedures introduced by several national commissions and the work of several internal inquiries, abuse flourished almost unchecked. By remaining silent, the church escapes much accountability. The massive institutional, cultural and deference barriers remain preventing victims, perpetrators and those shielding them from facing justice. These include: clericalism underpinned by so-called ontological superiority with which clerics deludedly regard themselves; protection of those in the institution rather the children, codified in monastic vows, exacerbated by the vow of permanency that engenders unquestioning life-long loyalty to individuals; and the additional layer of unaccountability provided by the ultimate authority and record keeper being in Rome, beyond the authorities' reach by dint of the repeated use of diplomatic immunity in such cases in countries throughout the world.

Victims can be protected only if the Vatican instructs the church worldwide to turn in those known or suspected to have abused children. Given the oft-repeated papal apologies, why cannot the pope deliver on this? As I [wrote](#) last week, doing so would provide a tangible example of the concrete measures to which he has committed.

On the secular regulatory regimes, I have more hope, but so far all we have is assurances, as opposed to hard evidence, that the many ineffective regulatory regimes are now fit for purpose.

The biggest step forward is that pupils and parents are now more aware and less deferential.

The most important action most likely to curb future abuse is to press as hard as possible for mandatory reporting for the known or suspected institutional abuse of children, and I wholeheartedly endorse that. Introducing it will however require overcoming powerful opposition from the government, the Anglican Church and possibly the Catholic Church too.

I appeal to you all, in children's best interests, to support the introduction of MR.

This article was updated on 29 April 2019 to reflect new evidence that emerged over claims that the Vatican Bank did not assist with the police investigation.

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