

“WITH THE PEOPLE – OPPOSED TO DOUBLE STANDARDS – POST-CLERICAL”

Summary of results from the sub-projects within the project

“Listen to victims – prevent abuse”

Presentation of the project report in St Paul’s Church, Frankfurt am Main, on 13 June 2020.

The project comprised nine sub-projects in which the experts worked for a period of nine months (September 2019 to May 2020). They tackled various questions with the aim of developing strategies which the Diocese of Limburg can implement to prevent future abuse and to enable an honest means of coming to terms with cases of abuse and ensuring that victims are acknowledged and respected.

Two aspects are highlighted by the results from all the sub-projects. Wherever abuse and victims’ fates have so far been viewed from the institution’s standpoint, with the primary aim of protecting the institution, the sub-projects now demand a radical shift of perspective: the viewpoint of the victims must have priority and must be the primary focus at all times.

How can that be achieved? And in addition, how do we want to prevent abuse in the future? The project experts recommend to the commissioning parties that the Church should make a clear break with the past – by working with the people concerned and against double standards, in a post-clerical manner.

What exactly does that mean?

... with the people

The **approach to communication will be turned around**: those affected will not have the role of supplicants; instead it is the diocese that must learn to listen. This will mean, for example, that if abuse occurs it will not be the victims who ask the bishop for an opportunity to talk, but the bishop who contacts the victims to ask for an opportunity to talk.

A complaints management system will be set up, along with the post of an **external ombudsman**, to make the processes involved objectively transparent and to prevent personal affinity or antipathy from impinging on contacts with the victims. It will be important to have external contact persons to help open up the closed system that has existed until now and to guarantee a neutral view from an external standpoint. The post of ombudsman will be geared specifically to children’s needs and will make it easier for child victims and child witnesses to report abuse.

A complaints management system and procedures that are accessible to all and based on specific guidelines for complaints will be created, plus a conciliation body as a first instance to be approached prior to the administrative jurisdiction. The objective of the **complaints management system** will be to provide “for every believer a transparent, freely and easily accessible means of lodging a complaint” (sub-project 8). This should expose and prevent at an early stage all forms of abuse of power, including sexual abuse. In addition, the legal culture in the diocese will be fostered, as even the possibility that a complaint will be filed can change actual practice.



An **expert in communication** should establish the mentioned complaint management system and be responsible for ensuring that the victims' perspective is always given priority, also in communication. The expert will determine binding paths for communication, and will manage and update published documents (on the internet, for example) on the topics of prevention, intervention and resolution, and will set up a feedback channel for which the expert will be the contact person. Furthermore, he or she will be responsible for communication with affected parishes and institutions, which will also have to be given intensive support in cases of (suspected) abuse. Work will continue to ensure that no aspects are forgotten – either consciously or unconsciously. This will result in specific “communication guidelines” that have universal application and are clearly comprehensible at all times.

The communication expert will be part of a newly established “**Office for handling cases of (sexual) violence**” with a remit for prevention, intervention and resolution. It will draw together the existing separate work focuses because the current structures are “insufficient to reliably ensure good quality support for those affected.” (...) “We most urgently recommend integrating the areas of prevention, intervention and resolution” (sub-project 4), especially so that experiences from the resolution process can feed into preventive measures. Alongside numerous other tasks, this office will be the point of contact for victims, their representatives and for the “irritated systems”. It will be responsible for public relations work and networking, will conduct training sessions, and will elaborate standards, for instance for employee commitments.

As sexual abuse often follows **spiritual abuse** (sub-project 5), special protection plans will be introduced to strengthen individuals in their dealings with clergy. These protection plans and the appointment of contact persons for victims of spiritual abuse will promote spiritual autonomy, raise awareness of spiritual abuse, prevent it and support victims. Standards intended to guard against spiritual abuse will be prepared for the entire diocese, and will be broken down for each area of responsibility and made binding. This is because spiritual abuse can occur at all levels, from training to spiritual guidance and all the way to everyday pastoral care. One means of raising awareness of the topic could be events that integrate results from pilot projects in other dioceses.

The **intervention regulations** setting out the procedures in cases of abuse should be revised such that the victims themselves steer the procedure and are included in the communication decisions. Clear structures will be created within the intervention body by the appointment of a co-ordinator, covering the costs of legal aid for the victims, an appropriate plausibility check, the provision of information about victims' rights and the above-mentioned complaints management system. Specific rules must be in place determining that no information will be passed on to investigating authorities over the heads of the victims, and that a criminal offence will only be reported if a legal advisor has been appointed at an early stage.

To prevent repeat offending, perpetrators who continue to be employed by the Church should receive general professional assistance. If they are relocated, their superiors should be informed of their past actions.



Furthermore, the intervention regulations should be revised so that **children's perspectives** are always taken into consideration. Improving the procedures from the viewpoint of minors who are victims will help to protect, support and empower them.

The identification of high-risk places and blind spots will require realignment of parish work, which will have to be more closely assessed from a children's perspective so that risks are recognised from the victims' viewpoint. A research office is to be mandated to analyse which specific measures will reduce these high-risk places and blind spots.

The MHG study revealed clearly that victims did not know who they should turn to. This was confirmed by the analysis of the diocese's online presence. The **website** demonstrates considerable weaknesses concerning abuse. Most importantly, the victims' perspective is not taken seriously and is not given space on the web pages. A new, revised website should help to remedy these deficiencies.

This will mean that the current articles on the website will be revised by the communication officer with support from a specially qualified member of staff from the field of information and public relations, to ensure that appropriate and sensitive language is used. An effective search function will also be introduced. Feedback from a person who is affected will be collected and his/her remarks will be integrated. The material on the new website will be updated regularly after it goes online.

The new website will offer comprehensive, clear, up-to-date information about the topic of abuse in a language that is appropriate to the victims.

... against double standards

"Classical Catholic sexual morals represent a risk factor for sexualised violence." This is the finding of sub-project 7. Asymmetrical power structures are a major factor promoting sexual abuse. The Church's sexual moral code suppresses the development of a mature sexuality, curtails the ability to speak about this topic, and fosters power asymmetry due to the possibility of excluding people from the sacraments or terminating their employment. At the same time, the traditional teachings contradict findings from the social sciences and the realities of people's lives.

For these reasons it is necessary to revise the Church's sexual moral code. Sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, must be re-assessed. The power discourse will be ended if and when the plurality of sexual orientations and partnerships can be accepted and respected, and communicated openly.

To encourage this long-term development, the MHG project recommends the Diocese of Limburg to undertake an official re-evaluation of sexuality, and particularly of homosexuality. The basic order will have to be amended. As long as the old order is in force, individual cases assessments by church employees should be accommodating and should document the fact that they are compliant with the Church's teachings. This will be guaranteed by binding rules issued by the diocese. It should be possible for homosexual couples to have their partnerships blessed, and to admit homosexual men as candidates for the priesthood. Official events should remove the taboos attached to (homo)sexuality and promote



a specific culture of acceptance. One special forum will be story-telling spaces, i.e. settings where victims can speak about injuries they kept private for a long time, and where a form of public recognition of and coming to terms with the most varied types of abuse can take place.

One central aspect will be the ongoing development of the training for candidates for the priesthood. It should foster the formation of an identity that integrates sexual identity on the basis of findings from the social sciences. Admitting homosexual candidates will remove the taboos attached to the topic and reduce the force of any discourse of power.

Sex education should also be revised accordingly and implemented at Church facilities, from children's day-care centres to schools and all the way to further education establishments.

... post-clerical

And finally, sexual abuse in the Church should be prevented by a post-clerical structure. Excessively high regard for the priesthood has reinforced the power asymmetry between priest and the laity. This trend has to be stopped.

1. **By overcoming clericalism:**

Sub-project 5 calls for a **“theology in the face of abuse”**. This means a call for a fundamental revision and a new direction for the official theology because it is seen as one of the key causes of abuse by priests around the world. A “theology in the face of abuse” will appeal for a new understanding of the priesthood which integrates the priest into the people of God. The understanding of the priesthood should be freed from its historical associations (purity and sacredness, authority and hierarchy), and its origins should be made clear again.

As clericalism is expressed in the liturgy in particular, sub-project 5 proposes a large number of measures the Diocese of Limburg can use to change the liturgy accordingly. They include eliminating, as far as possible, concelebration with several priests at the altar, giving testimonies of faith, and allowing lay persons to preach sermons. Alongside celebration of the Eucharist, other forms of liturgy should continue to be developed and strengthened. Throne-like seats should no longer be provided for presiders.

Furthermore, everyday privileges for priests should be terminated. Parish priests should have limited-term employment contracts and not be appointed for life. Honorific titles such as “Monsignor” should be abolished. Financial privileges such as special payments for housekeepers should also be stopped, and priests' birthdays should no longer be published.

Finally, overcoming clericalism will also involve redesigning the training for the priesthood. As far as possible training should be combined with that for other positions. Much less training should take place in the closed world of seminaries. In addition to encouraging sexual identity, training should be based on skills and promote teamwork. Transparent regulations should minimise dependence on persons in positions of power. Here, too, there should be no closed systems.



2. A post-clerical world is characterised by a **greater role for the laity and the general priesthood of all the baptised.**

Equal rights and equal status are of key importance. For this reason, 50% of the seats on all bodies should be filled by women. Dual leadership should be introduced at all levels, and the Vicar General should be reduced to his function as a priest and his office administration should be managed by a lay woman. The position of the laity should also be strengthened by merging the diocesan synodal council and the council of priests. There should no longer be one position (e.g. the Vicar General or the Bishop) where all powers are united, and instead power(s) should be shared – also in the Diocese of Limburg. The diocese should also have an administrative jurisdiction applicable to all priests.

3. The sub-projects last demand is that **pastoral care be made more professional.** Pastoral care is not automatically good because a priest (or a lay person) decides to call him or herself a pastoral worker. Instead, pastoral care must be subject to clear rules governing intervention and supervision. A new intermediate level will create clear, usable supervisory structures. Then also lay persons will be able to act as priests' supervisors. A transparent, binding system of personnel management should ensure that neither pastoral staff nor priests can act without supervision. A compulsory complete personnel dossier will document evidence of abuse if such cases arise. There will no longer be any secret files.

The sub-projects have compiled extensive documentation backing all of these demands. It sets out the corresponding rationale and paths to be pursued, in terms both of theology and of ecclesiastical law.

Moreover, details have been added in 61 implementation plans specifying the goals, measures and responsibilities associated with each demand. The project has thus not only produced demands, but has also mapped out very specific paths to be followed to implement these measures.

The Bishop and the President have now approved a "Commission for processing and implementation" of these measures. In the future the implementation plans can be used at any time to verify and document implementation of the project's findings. They should be published at regular intervals so that the public can find out at any time about whether the Diocese of Limburg really has made an honest break with the past...