

ORPHANS OF GOD



Covered furniture, 2005. Photo © Jackie Nickerson. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

A small but significant minority of Catholic priests have long evaded the doctrine of celibacy to become fathers in the physical sense, as well as the spiritual. For their children, the mothers, and the priests themselves the consequences are often cruelly life-altering. Now those who have been disavowed are demanding justice.

BY MICHELE FOSSI

"Vin, your dad is dead. These are the words that were whispered to me as I was ushered towards a corpse. He was gone. Those crucial words then quickly slipped out of my ear, not to be remembered for almost 20 years." Vincent Doyle, a psychologist in Ireland, was 28 years old when he learnt that the Roman Catholic priest he thought was his godfather was, in fact, his biological father. Confronting his mother on the topic, she one day confessed the truth.

"Everything suddenly started making sense," he recalls. "Throughout my life, I had always felt a strong attraction to churches. I even seriously considered the idea of becoming a Catholic priest. That day, I finally understood why. As a little child, I had spent time in the church with my father, and a subconscious part of me had not forgotten." Doyle is the founder of Coping International, a Dublin-based support network with 50,000 users in 175 countries, set up to promote the natural rights and the mental health of children born to Catholic priests.

Last month he published *Our Fathers: A Phenomenon of Children of Catholic Priests and Religious* [www.facebook/vincentdoyleauthor]. An intimate autobiographical tale of a priest's child, the book is also a comprehensive survey of a forgotten form of discrimination – the disavowal of children of the Catholic clergy and other religious orders. Doyle describes the process of writing the book as having been cathartic. "I suddenly remembered the letter I had written to my father when he died, the existence of which I had forgotten. I was typing on the keyboard when I saw my young boy's hand releasing that note beneath his purple robes to lie by him forever. The roots of my anguish lay in blue, mottled ink on that torn page, in a coffin – buried with care, as for centuries it has been good practice to do with priests' children's identity, to assure the adults concerned, society and the Church that they will no longer pose a threat."

First introduced in 1139, the rule of celibacy states that priests are not allowed to marry or have children. The reality is different. According to Coping

International, the number of "children of the ordained" – as the Church, in its typically opaque language, refers to priests' children – is estimated to be 15,000 globally. "Historically, the Church enshrouded the issue of children fathered by priests with a thick blanket of secrecy and shame," reads a passage on the organisation's website. "In many cultures, such children and their mothers were the targets of a combination of scorn and pity. If a mother approached a bishop asking for assistance, she was either rebuffed outright or forced to enter into a very tight confidentiality agreement that provided her with what was usually minimal assistance in return for lifelong, deep secrecy." In Doyle's view, the issue of clerical offspring is "the next scandal" to face the Church.

"The Church views the priests' children as a threat to its authority, and therefore nothing less than an enemy," says David Weber, the founder of the Frankfurt-based organisation Menschenrechte für Priesterkinder ("Human Rights for Children of Priests"). "Ultimately, these children are living proof that the Church's 1,000-year-old pretension that Catholic priests have no children is just not true." Hence the need to conceal the father's true identity at all costs, severing, when possible, his ties with the child, with grave, long-lasting consequences both for the child and the parents – a crime." Weber, the son of an Australian Jesuit who was living in Germany at the time he met his mother, holds the Church responsible for his disrupted and sad relationship with his late father, whom he only saw a few times in his life. "Shortly before my birth, the Jesuits sent my father back to Australia, where they forced him to marry a widow, chosen old enough that she could have no more children. She took great care that he didn't search for contact with my mother and me. When he died, his inheritance went to the Order, while I didn't receive a penny."

Weber goes on to criticise the Catholic Church's practice of making the mother of a priest's child sign non-disclosure agreements regarding the identity of her child's father. "Imagine a young woman who has very recently given birth to a

priest's child and is now not able to get in contact with this priest anymore, because the Church has ordered him to stop the relationship. She will panic. At this critical, vulnerable time, a member of the dioceses comes to her with a contract, promising some money, usually not much, in exchange for her silence." (One of these leaked secrecy contracts, stipulated between the Church and an American woman, can be inspected on the organisation's website.) "One can only imagine how damaging it is for a priest's child to grow up within such an oppressive cover-up culture. It instils gargantuan insecurities about one's identity and a profound sense of vulnerability.

Highly problematic, also, is having to deal with a mother who lies about your father's true identity or, even worse, asks you not to reveal it to anyone – an inhumane pressure that shapes a whole life. Not surprisingly, many of the priests' children I know have developed chronic diseases, often of psychosomatic origin. Even as adults, the sense of fear is so ingrained in them that they often hide being a child of a priest even to their closest friends."

In 2014, the United Nations, in a report on the Vatican's compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, recommended that the Holy See establish the number and identity of children fathered by Catholic priests, and take all necessary measures to ensure that their right to have a father is respected. The committee also called for the Holy See to ensure that churches no longer impose confidentiality agreements.

What is the Catholic Church's official stance on this matter? In February 2019, in an interview with *The New York Times*, the Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti confirmed the existence of an internal document dealing with the question, whose "inspiring principle", he assured, is the "protection of the child". According to the guidelines of this document, which was partially disclosed for the first time a few months later, the church requests priest fathers to leave their priesthood and "assume

[their] responsibilities as a parent by devoting [themselves] exclusively to the child."

Doyle believes that dismissal from the priesthood is not always in the child's best interests. The existential fear it generates may induce the priests not to recognise their children. If instead they opt for fatherhood, it deprives their family of a means of income. Weber stresses that whether or not the father remains a priest should not be decisive. "If a man becomes a father, it is his duty, morally and by law, to care for the child, irrespective of his professional occupation. The Church should not be allowed to use an internal rule, which celibacy ultimately is, to forbid its priest to abide by the secular law and support his child."

"Parenthood puts priests in front of an irreconcilable dilemma, worthy of a Greek tragedy: either continuing their ministry, and renouncing their child, or becoming a father, but unemployed," says Jens F., a secularised priest from South Germany. He was still in office, in 2015, when he learnt that the woman with whom he was having a secret relationship, today his wife, was pregnant. "Not for a second did I think of shirking my duties as a father. Yet the prospect of losing my job, my pension, and with them the respect of my parish, was utterly terrifying. It took me two years to find the courage to announce to my congregation that I was leaving my office as a priest to become a father, running the risk of becoming an outcast – two long years, during which I was living a lie."

The most challenging moments, he recalls, were the two Christmases that he and his family had to celebrate separately, "meeting briefly on the sly", and baptism ceremonies. "In front of those happy young families, while I was pouring holy water on the forehead of the toddlers, I would think to myself: how come you cannot be by your family now, like these happy fathers?" In September 2018, Jens F. held his last sermon in the church, coming out about his fatherhood and saying goodbye to his parish. "I didn't know how my parishioners would react. To my surprise, they all showed their support, even the oldest among them. Paradoxically, the only ones who, at first, didn't react well were

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members of my family. They were embarrassed at the idea that people, in our little town, would talk about us." Seven months later, he found work as a religious counsellor in several hospice facilities, finally setting himself free of the existential fear that had accompanied him for nearly three years. "Isn't it ironic that I have more souls to look after now than when I was a priest?" he says with a smile. "I consider myself lucky. Not all priests who embrace fatherhood manage to find a job so quickly that matches their expectations. A former colleague of mine, who also fathered a child, is now working in a call centre."

Since Jens F. left office, the Catholic Church has shown encouraging signs of openness towards priests and their children, a development that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago. In June 2019, a first historical meeting between bishops and "silenced" priests' children took place in Paris. The same year, the Vatican announced that priests who have fathered children could openly acknowledge their offspring without losing their job. "But on a painful condition: that they sever all sentimental bonds with the child's mother," Jens F. points out. "So this is a step forward only on paper." For the situation of priests' families to significantly improve, he argues, the Catholic Church should make celibacy optional, as it is in many other churches.

His words might sound like wishful thinking, considering that even a liberal pope like Francis

reiterated his firm opposition to the abolition of the rule of celibacy as recently as February 2020. But voiced by a secularised German priest, Jens F.'s suggestion takes on a decidedly different weight. In September 2019, the German Catholic Church inaugurated the Synodal Path – a series of conferences with "deliberative power" to discuss a range of contemporary theological questions. These questions included the ordination of women to the Catholic clergy and the abolition of the obligation of celibacy for Catholic priests. Both are highly controversial and explosive proposals, which, if passed by the assembly of German bishops, would inevitably open a rift with Rome. Five centuries after Luther, some commentators have even gone so far as to ventilate the hypothesis of a new schism.

Talk of secession is likely an exaggeration. However, what if the germ of revolt that has sprouted in Germany were to spread to other countries? Would this, in the end, force the Vatican to review its position on married priests? While not wishing to demonise celibacy excessively ("For some it can be a true gift"), Vincent Doyle hopes that the Pope, one day, will soften his stance towards this centuries-old rule. When celibacy is no longer obligatory, and the Church no longer sees clergy children as a threat to its authority and reputation, this stigma, he thinks, will eventually disappear – finally allowing these children to be just children. "Until the Catholic Church accepts married priests, suffering children of the ordained will always exist. So, what is more important? ▀