

**Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on
Social and Family Affairs**

Seán Healy s.m.a. and Brigid Reynolds s.m.

Directors, CORI Justice

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The circumstances have changed since we were invited to present our views on the Budget to this Committee. We apologise for the appalling abuse perpetrated by members of 18 congregations who are among the 138 member-congregations of CORI. We also recognise that an apology or any number of apologies is far from being enough. The congregations concerned need to seek the forgiveness of the Irish people whose trust they have almost unforgivably abused.

In critiquing the government's recent Budget and in all the other work that CORI Justice does we apply Gospel-based principles to do three things i.e.:

1. To reflect on the situation as it is,
2. To identify an alternative and better future, and
3. To seek out appropriate pathways to move from the situation as it is towards the desired future.

The core principles we apply include justice, human dignity and compassion. These principles apply across the board. Before addressing the Government's Budget we¹ wish to apply these same principles to the current issues that arise as a result of the findings of the *Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (the *Ryan Report*) published last Wednesday, May 20th, 2009.

1. Reflecting on the situation as it is

The Ryan report identifies an appalling reality of abuse sexual, physical, and emotional. The pain and hurt caused to so many people in these institutions by abuse on such a vast scale is horrendous. It was extensive and systemic. It was far worse than we had realised. No words can convey the horror, pain, shame and anger felt by us at the revelations contained in that Report. No words of apology can provide an adequate response to such abuse.

The religious congregations named, and all of us, need to reflect with humility on the content of this Report and on its implications. The Report's findings are a catalogue

¹ 'We' throughout this part of the presentation refers to the two presenters before today's Oireachtas Committee meeting i.e. Sr Brigid Reynolds, S.M. and Fr Sean Healy, S.M.A. both of whom have been directors of CORI Justice for more than a quarter of a century.

of injustice characterised by an unspeakable level of abuse of human dignity and a massive lack of compassion that continued for many decades. The damage caused to innocent children is incalculable and has had major repercussions for them and their families across several generations.

The failings at every level are reprehensible. For the religious congregations these include the huge failure of leadership across the system and across a range of administrations. It portrays an abomination that cannot be excused on any basis whatsoever.

2. Identifying an alternative and better future

Before turning to what the congregations' concerned need to do to put right the horrendous wrongs we have spoken of, we do need to acknowledge that there is much that needs to be learned from the past so as to ensure that all vulnerable people are provided with the care and respect which they have every right to receive.

Where **children** are concerned we believe that the high-level goals contained in the national agreement *Towards 2016* identify what a better future for children might look like. These high level goals see a future where:

- Every child should grow up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services, to nurture and care for the child, and foster the child's development and full and equal participation in society;
- Every family should be able to access childcare services which are appropriate to the circumstances and needs of their children;
- Every child should leave primary school literate and numerate;
- Every student should complete a senior cycle or equivalent programme, (including ICT) appropriate to their capacity and interests;
- Every child should have access to world-class health, personal social services and suitable accommodation;
- Every child should have access to quality play, sport, recreation and cultural activities to enrich their experience of childhood, and;
- Every child and young person will have access to appropriate participation in local and national decision-making.

Where **religious** are concerned we believe that religious should do everything in their power to promote the emergence of such a society. We have spoken specifically on the issue of children here but there are similar high-level goals in *Towards 2016* that spell out a desirable future for people of working age, for older people and for people with disabilities.

3. Seeking out appropriate pathways to move from the situation as it is towards the desired future.

It is crucial in the present context that religious congregations and others realise that actions speak louder than words. The suffering of the abused must not be prolonged in any way by any word or action from any of us. "By their deeds you shall know them" is a scriptural phrase with strong resonance here. An attitude of humility coupled with a protracted exercise in restitution is what is now required of the religious congregations if the victims, their children and the Irish people in general are even to begin to forgive the congregations for their inexcusable betrayal of trust. This must

begin with a clear statement from the congregations concerned that seeks forgiveness, rather than offers apology.

All 23 recommendations contained in the *Ryan Report* should be implemented immediately and without qualification.

The scale and depth of the realities identified in the *Ryan Report* require a re-assessment of what has been done to date. Without doubt substantial additional resources should be made available by the congregations involved. We are not aware of what resources the 18 congregations have. If financial resources exist then they should be applied to addressing this reality. If financial resources do not exist then other resources that are available should be contributed. All options must be on the agenda including the possibility of making a further much larger contribution to meet the bill for redress and to assist the victims.

We recognise that the response to the Report can never really compensate for all the suffering and pain endured by the people placed in the care of religious. However, we believe that everything possible should be done both concretely and symbolically to make restitution for the huge wrongs that have been done to some of this nation's most vulnerable people. We commit to play a full part in doing all we possibly can to achieve this.