

A WEB OF HUMAN SUFFERING

When the interim report from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) was published in August 2018 the headlines were not easy reading: ‘Major enquiry finds decades of sexual abuse at Ampleforth’ (ITV, 9 August 2018), ‘Report damns culture of acceptance of sexual abuse’ (*The Guardian*, 9 August 2018). The publication of the IICSA Report on 20 October brought the issue of child sexual abuse into sharp focus once again.

The truth is often uncomfortable. It is made even more so because behind every headline and sound bite there are people whose lives have been damaged and destroyed. People who continue to walk the painful road to recovery. When the headlines fade and the media attention turns elsewhere the traumatic memories, the wounds inflicted by abuse remain. It seems a terrible paradox of abuse that the perpetrator often walks away undisturbed, while the one who has been violated is left with shame, guilt, anger, and a fear of not being heard or believed. That members of Ampleforth monastic community were responsible for such suffering and that we failed to protect those committed to our care is deeply shocking.

We have publicly apologised for our past failings, and we have acknowledged the readiness to learn difficult and painful lessons so that we can implement credible change. As Abbot of Ampleforth, I take this opportunity to offer my sincere and heartfelt apology to anyone who suffered abuse while in the care of our schools, parishes, or other ministries. We are deeply sorry, and we seek to ensure that this could never happen again. Feeling the pain and trauma that our actions have caused has galvanised us to put into place safeguarding policies and protocols that put children and adults at risk at the very centre of what we do and the decisions we make. This includes a formal commitment to reporting of any suspected or actual case of abuse to statutory agencies as if mandatory reporting were in place.

We have worked hard, with the help and guidance of many professionals, on the process of creating a positive safeguarding culture, firstly because what happened was wrong and should never have happened, but secondly because safeguarding is at the core of our faith as Christians and our mission as monks. We are committed to looking for new opportunities to improve and embed a culture of committed leadership, vigilance, curiosity, care and kindness. It is in that spirit that the monastic community and the Ampleforth Abbey Trust (AAT) welcomes this

Final Report published by the IICSA and will study carefully and take seriously its recommendations to further develop our own safeguarding culture and practice building on the significant changes which have already taken place since the publication of the investigation report into Ampleforth and Downside in August 2018. We have an experienced and highly respected Director of Safeguarding who has worked in senior roles in local authority children's services. We have completed a review of governance and moved forward on separation of Ampleforth Abbey from Ampleforth College. Living next door to one another we are now separate in terms of organisational structure and operation, though we have a Safeguarding Information Sharing Protocol that seeks to promote collaboration in keeping children and adults at risk safe.

We at Ampleforth have been under close scrutiny for many years from regulators; the Charity Commission launched a statutory inquiry into the charity in November 2016 and in March 2018 appointed an Interim Manager with all the powers and duties of a trustee in respect of a number of safeguarding-related matters; and, following the discharge of the Interim Manager, in May 2020 issued a set of Directions to monitor the Charity's safeguarding processes and procedures for the next 12 months. We have welcomed the opportunity to work with the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA) since its inception and volunteered to have our case work audited. We consider such 'close scrutiny' a valuable opportunity to listen, learn and move forward demonstrating integrity and transparency.

The art of listening

In September 2021 Pope Francis urged European bishops to listen to survivors of clergy abuse and consider them partners in reforming the Catholic Church and forming its response and policies. Listening to and learning from survivors of abuse has been and continues to be a very humbling experience. The Survivors Working Group in place at Ampleforth Abbey ensures consistent and appropriate consideration of all contacts made by, or on behalf of, survivors of abuse. The charity's 'Safeguarding Commitment' includes a clear commitment to our ongoing important work with survivors of abuse: *'We offer a heartfelt and honest apology, reparation and, as they wish, support to survivors and victims who have experienced abuse by monks, staff or volunteers of Ampleforth Abbey. We offer pastoral support to any survivor or victim of past abuse wherever this occurred.'* A Commitment to Survivors frames the way we work with survivors and sets out clearly what survivors may expect of us in our engagement with them, including the onward reporting of safeguarding allegations.

The art of learning

It is often remarked that we must learn from our mistakes. That mistakes were made, that abuse happened, is an undeniable tragedy which we will never forget. And so, we set out to learn from survivors, from experts and professionals, to learn from our past and to choose to live with integrity now and into the future.

The November 2020 *Elliott Review of Safeguarding Structures and Arrangements in the Catholic Church in England and Wales* recommended that Safeguarding Commissions be re-positioned as sub-committees of charitable Boards. Although this was already the case at Ampleforth, the board took the opportunity to carefully review the remit and reporting line of its Commission, resulting in the restructuring of the Safeguarding Committee, to oversee overall performance and effectiveness of safeguarding across the Trust, and a Safeguarding Panel reporting into the Committee, to manage individual monastic safeguarding casework and make recommendations to the Abbot as Religious Superior. These were established within the charitable Board structure. With a lay independent chair and lay independent members, the Panel has responsibility for oversight of safeguarding matters in the monastery.

Learning is not just about setting up the correct bureaucratic structures. It includes listening to people whom we are lucky enough to count as advisers: a lay chair of the Panel who is a renowned consultant in safeguarding and sexual abuse; Panel membership made up entirely of external professional safeguarding experts including members with experience in Children's Services, Adult Care Provision, the Police and the Probation Service; an open invitation to the North Yorkshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (NYSCP) to attend all Panel meetings; and a lay chair of the Safeguarding Committee who is an experienced child protection expert. To their expertise and insight is submitted monastic safeguarding casework so that any decisions recommended to the Abbot is rooted in the protection of children and adults at risk, not in protection of the reputation of the monastic community and the Church at large.

Of course, there are tensions and differences of opinion. And it is here that the importance of transparent, open dialogue cannot be overestimated. There is no place in the Church, or indeed society, for abuse. There will be no place to hide for offenders. Ampleforth is committed to listening, learning, and discerning the best way forward according to the principles of natural justice and proportionality.

Our monastic community is committed to learning, reflecting on the past and ensuring that we align with modern day good practice in safeguarding, mindful of the positions of trust we hold. Our reflections move beyond the basic requirement for scrupulous reporting and now also focus on professional boundaries and how to minister and care for people appropriately and safely.

Moving forward

There is no room for complacency. We know that we must continue to improve and, as our strategic plan: '*Choosing a Future Together*' makes clear, demonstrating our safeguarding commitment is a priority. Actions, not just words. Actions, not just nice bureaucratic structures. Ampleforth Abbey is committed to embedding a safeguarding culture that demonstrates care and respect for individuals. This arises from our humanity and our firm Christian faith and conviction that each human life has dignity worth protecting because each of us is created by God and bears his image and likeness. This is a basic tenet of our Christian faith (Matthew 18:5) and the Rule of St Benedict that forms the lives and attitudes of the monks and employees. Because of this we have an obligation to welcome all our visitors, whether they are children or adults into an environment that is safe and that focuses on their needs and priorities.

Safeguarding is not simply about pointing the finger of blame, naming, and shaming. Nor is it only about procedures and policies. Fundamentally safeguarding is about protecting, nurturing, and upholding the dignity of each human person. It is our duty to create a culture that nurtures and protects this dignity. It is part of the Church's mission, a mission to which we strive to be faithful in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel and the *Rule* of St Benedict.

We ask ourselves "Is this enough?". Sadly, however much we strive to improve, it will never be "enough". It is of course a work in progress, an extremely important work as we seek to untangle the web of abuse that is the cause of so much human suffering. We continue to listen, learn, and move forward with the help of those who engage with us and share their thoughts and stories. We seek to be a place of healing and recovery, and to be a place of safety where all our visitors can encounter the peace that Jesus longs to give.

Rt Rev Robert Igo OSB became a monk of Ampleforth Abbey in 1988 and was elected Abbot of Ampleforth in January 2021.