

THE IRISH TIMES

Marie Collins wary but glad to be helping Vatican protect minors

Patsy McGarry

Less than 20 years ago, Marie Collins's parish priest in Dublin warned the congregation at Mass that her story of abuse by a priest was not to be believed. Now she advises [Pope Francis](#) on child protection and is a member of the only [Vatican](#) commission with direct access to him.

This Dublin abuse survivor got the invitation to join the Vatican Commission for the Protection of Minors last year. She believes it arose from a 2012 Vatican symposium on child protection she went to.

She accepted the invitation, albeit with caution. "I've had churchmen lie to my face and who felt justified in misleading and being economical with the truth."

But she felt she should join the commission. "I've been let down so often and so many survivors have been let down so often. We've had so many false dawns that if this commission doesn't follow through it will be so . . . I think it's the church's last chance to get it right."

It hasn't been plain sailing. Some in the Vatican "find it a little difficult to work with lay people, women in particular. There's been no overt stumbling block or anything put in our way. It's just my own personal feeling, my own lack of trust, my own cynicism because of my history."

But she is aware of the commission's uniqueness. "If you go back 10 years, who would believe the Vatican would invite so many lay people, women and survivors, right into its heart to advise?" she says.

'Enormous step'

"The fact that we're there at all is an enormous step forward in accepting that this issue has to be dealt with."

In the commission she believes "in some areas I think we have made good progress; in other areas we've been very slow. My expectation was that the work would be done more quickly."

Her fellow commission members are "really good and have the right intentions". She does not believe the slow pace is "intentional hindrance". At the Vatican "they simply do things in a very different way to the secular world. They've been doing things that way for so long they don't see it as slow. I find it frustrating."

When she agreed to join the commission, "my priority was always accountability – if there's no accountability, it's all a waste of time".

That's why the announcement earlier this year of setting up a new tribunal to hold bishops to account, with power to remove them, was "very important", she said.

The commission has 17 members, including secretary Msgr Bob Oliver, with its own offices and staff in the Vatican. Its membership is balanced between men and women, laity and clergy, with two abuse survivors, [Marie Collins](#) and [Peter Saunders](#). Its term of office is for three years until 2018. It meets for two plenary sessions a year, soon to be three.

Healing

Most of the work is done through working groups, which was thought to be necessary because of the scale of the issue. This is done via a secure site and on Skype. A commission member may lead just one working group but can serve on three. The groups may bring in outside experts.

Collins leads the group on healing and is a member of the group on child protection guidelines and the education of church leadership in this.

The commission has agreed on an annual Day of Prayer for Survivors of Abuse.

Collins feels commission chairman Cardinal Seán O'Malley has been "very good. He has very good rapport with Pope Francis. He brings our recommendations directly to Pope Francis. So far anything we've put forward, the pope has accepted."

But "my fear is that if we had a change, would the same impetus be there? Every pope has different priorities."

She knows survivor groups are wary of the commission. "I received a lot of criticism for agreeing to be part of it."

But she thinks "some survivor groups are beginning, maybe, to have a little hope".

Fr [Tom Doyle](#), the respected US priest who has been critical of the church on child protection for decades,

spoke to commission members recently. "He is seen as a very forthright critic. As a survivor I had numerous communications with people saying that if the commission was really serious, they'd talk to Tom Doyle." He "came and spoke to us in a very valuable presentation".

She has found being on the commission "very stressful: the travelling, the being away from home. Ray [her husband] and I wouldn't have been apart much in the past."

Being a survivor on the commission has meant "you're discussing issues that can bring up emotional reactions and that's difficult".

She also feels "there is no point in being on the commission if I don't speak up and say what I believe is right. It's not always easy."

The "biggest stress of all is other survivors being in contact, because I cannot do anything for them. Emotionally that's very, very difficult." But she replies to everyone.

"People have expectations of you you can't live up to. You haven't the power."

© 2015 irishtimes.com