

## 1,500 Confessions

What is more important – the confessional seal or the safety of our children?

In the current debate on Catholic secrecy and civil mandatory reporting over child sexual assault, there is one case we need to examine because it demonstrates how the confessional ritual can be used to cover up crimes.

It happened in Queensland in 2004.

After pleading guilty in court to sexually abusing children, Fr Michael McArdle signed an affidavit stating he had previously confessed his crimes to fellow priests more than 1,500 times to 30 different priests over a 25-year period.

It is rare indeed to learn what is said in times of such revelation: an agent of God confessing hideous acts against children.

But in this case we have a record.

Fr McArdle, in his affidavit, wrote: "I was devastated after the assaults, every one of them. So distressed would I become that I would attend confessions weekly..."

Confession gave him solace.

"It was like a magic wand had been waved over me," he explained.

The 'magic' of confession allowed him to go and assault other children with an unburdened mind.

If we take Fr McArdle's 1,500 confessions and divide them by the 30 priests who heard them, it gives us an average of 50 confessions per priest over 25 years.

During the face to face confessions, each priest, as if using one mind (or going off a script), all repeated the same advice: "Go home and pray."

Did not one of those ordained men feel anything for the children who were being continuously molested?

In 2011 when Senator Nick Xenophon released a press statement "*Confession of Child Abuse Must Be Reported to Police*", one priest defended the confessional seal saying: "The proposed change could scare offenders away from confession, which otherwise could be a first step towards seeking treatment or surrendering to police."

Where was this encouragement for paedophile priest Fr McArdle from his 30 fellow priests?

It wasn't there.

If Fr McArdle had not been forgiven perhaps his guilt would have compelled him to get help or surrender himself to police.

Maybe, in these circumstances, guilt is good.

Of course, Fr McArdle's weekly cycle of offending was not helped by the 25 years of confessional forgiveness. It aided and abetted him.

Mandatory reporting would have stopped him, without doubt.

All those victims it could have saved... All that pain... How many suicides?

Fr McArdle received a 6-year jail sentence for his quarter century of crimes against innocent children.

The 30 priests should have been in a cell too.

The church did nothing to help the children.

My 26-year old daughter Emma suicided four years ago because our parish priest sexually assaulted her over several years in primary school.

The effect was crippling for both of my daughters raped by him.

This criminal was assaulting and raping children for 47 of his 50 years as a priest.

Did he also seek forgiveness in the confessional box from his fellow priests?

What of the other 117 Victorian priest and brother offenders? Were their criminal secrets, like Fr McArdle's, held safe in the confessional seal for their protection?

Simply put, if mandatory reporting in the confessional was enforced no offender would confess unless he wanted to be apprehended, so all would be resolved.


Confession is just a rule the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy created and enforced upon its followers.

The church can change it, as it did celibacy rule so many centuries ago.

If the confessional seal prevails over the demand for child protection what precedent is being set when Victoria's civil law of mandatory reporting of child sex crimes cannot be enforced because of a foreign sovereign state's (The Vatican) religious law?

The Catholic Church says confession is sacrosanct - I say the bodies of children are sacrosanct

Chrissie Foster, Co-author of Hell on the Way to Heaven.

  
21<sup>st</sup> July 2012