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## Accountability: Systemic failure in the Church

by Russell Pollitt SJ

Accountability. The word I repeatedly heard in a recent conference on the safeguarding of children hosted by the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar. It is no secret that the most damaging thing that has happened to the Catholic Church in its long history is the sexual abuse of children. This has often been portrayed as the result of some sick men in the priesthood. While that is partly true, there is another side to the coin.

I have been criticised for my critique in this column - mostly by fellow clergy and leaders in the Church. But some things need to be said and need to be repeated again and again. The abuse crisis lays bare the Church's systemic failure to ensure that mechanisms of accountability are in place and followed. It is no use having accountability mechanisms that do not work in practice. This can be said for almost every level of the system.

There are structures in a parish that parish priests are supposed to be accountable to. The finance committee is one example. There are many cases where priests simply ignore, at best, or defy at worst, the advice that they are given. The same is true for Parish Pastoral Councils.

Some priests say that most damaging and outrageous things from the pulpit and people feel that they are unable to challenge them. In this way, they too do not hold them accountable.

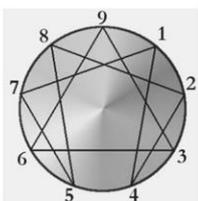
Parish priests are supposed to be accountable to the local Ordinary, i.e. the local bishop. In practice, this often fails. Bishops either do not really know what priests are doing (many think they do!), or priests simply do as they please, and many bishops do not hold them accountable. Bishops (and religious provincials) are themselves not held to account – this has been exposed over and over again in the child abuse crisis.

The fact of the matter is, if one compared the Church to any other organisation, we would dismally fail when it comes to accountability. Doctors, lawyers, psychologists and cashiers in shops are all held accountable. In the Church, people do almost anything – from preach outrageous sermons, steal money, not do a full day's work, unjustly dismiss employees and pay unjust wages – and are not held to account.

Parishes are often run on the whim of whoever the priest is. A new priest arrives and imposes his idiosyncrasies on a community with absolutely no consultation. The faith of people can be shaken as a new priest not only sets about changing things but has no respect for the faith of the people and imposes his own theology on them. Bishops are often silent when this happens.

Until we take accountability seriously and ensure that it is not just mouthed by using the right words, or promised, when there is a crisis like the abuse one, there is little hope for change. Jesus gives his friends responsibility for proclaiming the reign of God at the Ascension. This is a privilege that we should embrace. Sadly, our systemic lack of accountability undermines our ability to be credible proclaimers of the reign of God.

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