

“The Emperor has lost his clothes!” It must have been an embarrassing moment really. A moment of shame actually. His nakedness exposed in full view of all. Nowhere to go for cover. True, there were those present who relished the sight of the emperor parading around in his nakedness. Some have even been secretly longing for this moment, when out of their own hurt and anger they longed for the humiliation of the once proud ruler. For most though, I suspect, there is the feeling of discomfort; embarrassment; shared shame, or even anguish at witnessing the exposure of one once vested with absolute power and authority. Witnessing a fall from grace as in full frontal nakedness.

The Emperor; stripped of all vestiges of power and privilege, once used in authority over the very people who now witness his nakedness. And while some laugh; others turn their backs in rejection or squirm in embarrassment. Who dares take the risk of reaching out to the one now humiliated?

How must it have been for the emperor? Caught in the confused space of still ruling, yet cruelly exposed in front of his people. Listening to the laughter; confronted with the rejection; not knowing what to say to the confused and bewildered; seeing the hurt in the faces of those betrayed. Even still, only slowly becoming aware of his complete nakedness and humiliation.

The relationship between emperor and people can no longer be the same. Choices now need to be made. Does he cover up? Too late and too deep the trauma for this now. There is no going back. Do the people turn their backs? Some do, but to others, this flawed emperor is loved too much. Do they clothe the emperor in the clothes he has left behind? I think those garments are gone forever, the reminder of shame and betrayal.

Let the emperor be dressed in robes which no longer set him aside from his people; but in robes that are more comfortable to wear and which no longer weigh him down with the legacy of years of misrule, and the expectations of the people; robes which are no longer indicative of trappings of power, but reflect new relationships based upon an equality of dignity and action.

Whatever the responses taken though to the scandal and shame of abuse, of children and of power, priesthood and consecrated life, like the emperor, stand exposed. Laity too are faced with a choice. Do we stand back and stare? Do we snigger and use the dilemma to justify our own weaknesses or rejection of church? Do we turn our backs, embarrassed in front of our friends or afraid of the consequences? Do step up to the mark and work with our priests and religious to re-clothe them in garments that speak of their dignity; their humanity and their equality with us?

The institutional church has many decisions to make, but maybe as those who share a common baptism with priests and religious, the faithful also need to shoulder our responsibility. Our responsibility may not be for past decisions and blatant cover-ups, but it is we who clothe our leaders with the different roles and expectations we place upon them. Under those garments, the ordained and the vowed stand as vulnerable as the rest of us. How often have we kept clergy and

laity apart for fear of inhibiting each other? How often have we as laity handed over responsibility for our moral decisions to the priest?

Not many people would choose to be in leadership roles in Church today. Has there been any time in history that has seen the Church placed in such a place of shame? And yet, our faith tells us that those in leadership today are not there by accident, but have been chosen by the Spirit to lead his People forward at this time, in the middle of this mess. What a humbling and frightening thought for Church leaders. Awesome consequences depending upon decisions made.

The abuse scandal has highlighted the need for change in Church structures. No more closed shops of clericalism, where “Father knows best” and the rest of us are on the receiving end of decisions made by well meaning but closed circles of clerics. Some though will be slow to learn.

What point is there too in changing structures, if hearts and attitudes remain unchanged? Openness and accountability are called for, and not only regarding the issue of sexual abuse. To focus on abuse is to have missed the point. It is bigger than that. Abuse did not cause the scandal in Church, the structures and inbuilt culture that enabled it to flourish did. Redress must be radical. It calls no less than for the courage for restructuring and reimagining the church in Ireland? It cannot fall short of that. People demand it.

Changes in structures though are easier to focus on than changes in attitudes. The shape of the Church that we build will be determined by our creative and compassionate response to the scandal of abuse, and to our faith in the Spirit who is calling us to new life. Our focus cannot be on wondering when the crisis will pass, but on what changes the crisis is calling us to make? Certainly a Church which sees as anathema the thought of separation and different castes, but one which cherishes collaboration and partnership as core to its being. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed: “Behold I do a new thing. Do not cling to the things of the past.” In such a church, everything must be open to review and renewal. Risk and challenge will be seen to be normal.

Are the days of the Emperor finished? Only if he refuses to listen. It is time for the begrudgers and those who attempt to restore the past to step back. Some ask how the people can forgive the Church. They too have missed the point. The church belongs to us and is loved by us. It is time to build that church of the people. The giftedness and leadership is there that can lead us into a renewed Church with new relationships and shared dreams. The dead wood must be sifted out. The King is dead – long live the King!