

Friday September 7, 2018

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Dear Pope Francis,

I am writing this as an open letter in response to your letter dated August 20th written to the people of God. As such, I invite the hundreds of thousands of survivors of sexual abuse and their families to add their brave voices in speaking directly to you and the Vatican. I am writing to request action to demonstrate commitment to institutional reform. Without action, I cannot believe your apology is genuine. Often, lawyers and journalists speak for us. It is time for those of us who have survived sexual abuse by a priest or clergy to come together in raising our voices to demand leadership, action and change.

My name is John Robert Swales. My story is not unique. I was sexually abused by Father Barry Glendinning in London Ontario, Canada for five years between 1969 - 1974 when he was arrested and convicted for the sexual abuse of myself and four other children. Despite the conviction, Father Glendinning would go on to other parishes and countless other children. The Church abandoned my family as soon as Father was arrested. We never recovered. I was 15. In the years that followed, I lost myself in alcohol, drugs and prostitution. I have a grade ten education. It wasn't until 1995 that I found my way out of the darkness when I began to name what happened to me and speak about my experience.

In 1996, I sought redress from the Church. I wanted an apology and support to heal from trauma. Instead I was met with lawyers and threats. This began an eight year legal battle that left me exhausted, exposed and further bloodied. My family won our very public court case in 2004. We were awarded compensation that did not address the breach. In hindsight, I realize that what I wanted more than anything was a sincere apology for what had happened and then to be held and supported by the Church that I had loved, through the aftermath.

In your letter you write: *"We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people."* I found my people when I found my voice. My people form a community that never wanted to be. Our bond has been established through a shared experience of profound betrayal, malicious sexual violence and systematic abuse at the hands of your priests, bishops, cardinals and popes.

They are 'your' priests. Sexual abuse by priests has been documented for centuries.¹ The roots and the rot of sexual violence in the Church run deep. The Catholic Church has allowed and actively facilitated the ongoing global attack of children. I believe the Church has committed crimes against humanity. As head of the organization, I hold you responsible. For there to be real change, we need honesty and accountability. We need a restorative, wholehearted approach that is committed to institutional change to stop all forms of abuse.

Under your leadership, the Vatican continues to distance itself from responsibility and liability by foisting accountability onto individual priests and dioceses. This is another kind of abuse of power. In the province of Nova Scotia here in Canada, whole populations lost their church because the scapegoat diocese went bankrupt to pay the settlements. The ongoing practice of abandoning the people on the

¹ See Reverend Thomas Doyle, *Crusade Against Clergy. A Very Short History of Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* and also United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child - 2015 report.

frontlines of the Church is reprehensible and casts a long shadow of doubt on the sincerity of your letter.

There is nothing specific written in your letter about the actions that might follow and no acknowledgement of the multiple orchestrated cover-up of moving predatory priests and the silencing of victims through threats of ex-communication and non-disclosure agreements.

Apology without action is empty.

I cannot accept your apology that is issued from the safety and distance of the Vatican. I cannot accept your apology until you acknowledge the hypocrisy of the Church that sets itself up as the highest moral authority yet is founded on vast and unearned patriarchal privilege, deep-set misogyny, homophobia and racism. As a Canadian, I cannot accept your apology until you explicitly acknowledge and include First Nations people and the atrocities of the residential schools.

You write; *“no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient.”* I believe that you underestimate the importance of these things. I cannot speak for anyone but myself; however, if the Bishop had sincerely apologized for what was done to me as a child, followed by supportive long-term resources to repair the harm, I might have recovered my life and my family. I might have forgiven the Church.

Toward “opening up new paths of creativity” referenced in your letter, I submit that there are three voluntary actions to take. First, go straight to the source of pain. Direct non-offending priests and bishops all over the world to go with true humility to ask each person harmed in their parish for forgiveness. Listen silently to the devastating stories of survivors and their families. Believe them. Accept when forgiveness is not possible. Ask what would be meaningful to heal. Respond with generosity and largesse.

Second, in seeking justice, we continue to face hostility and brutish litigation from the Church and those who protect it. Stop forcing survivors to litigate for compensation. Be willing to go to the lengths of bankrupting the institution in the name of healing all those the Church has hurt and destroyed.

Third, publicly acknowledge the role of the Catholic Church in residential schools in Canada. Acknowledge and apologize for the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of Indigenous peoples by priests and nuns.

To kill the “root of those evils” referenced in your letter, you can make the material wealth of the Church available to survivors. The wealth of the Church came from the people and should be returned to them. These are global actions that might serve the Church to “overcome the thirst for power and possessions” and the ongoing corruption that has shielded clerical abuse and the misuse of power for centuries. In directing such a deeply personal process, I suspect you will find that many still love the Church, and that forgiveness and healing is possible.

You write, *“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it”*. My people and your people are suffering. I ask that you use your considerable power to do something remarkable and real.

Sincerely,



John Swales
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