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Cross to bear: Ireland's Ryan Commission into child abuse in the Catholic Church

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The report into the Irish Catholic Diocese of Cloyne pointed to dysfunction at the centre of the Catholic Church. Flickr/William Murphy

Ireland has undergone a painful purification regarding widespread child sexual and physical abuse in what were once revered institutions of church and state.

Since the 1990s, no less than 14 high-powered and damaging reports into the abuse and exploitation of children in church-run orphanages, industrial schools and parishes have been published.

The central thread in all these reports has been of a story of cover-up by the State and institutions putting their own interests before those of children. When confronted with evidence of sex abuse, religious authorities responded by transferring offenders to other locations, where in many instances they were free to abuse again.

The story emerging from Australia is uncannily similar to what occurred in Ireland. The [Royal Commission](#) should look at the process that was undertaken in Ireland as the only other country to have undertaken a national inquiry. Judge Ryan who oversaw the publication of the 2009 [Ryan Report](#) after nine years, concluded the rape and abuse of children within the care of the Catholic Church was endemic. [Judge Ryan](#) has advised the Royal Commission not to have a specific time limit as the Ryan Commission process shows they had to deal with a number of unexpected obstacles.

The commission's original judge, [Mary Laffoy](#) resigned in 2003 over claims that the Irish Department of Education – which was charged with inspecting the orphanages and industrial schools – was refusing to hand over documents to her. The Ryan Commission also did not

expect they would draw on the testimonies of thousands of former inmates and officials from more than 250 church run-institutions resulting in a [2,600 page final report](#). During the commission's investigations, oral evidence was collected from more than 1,000 people, mainly aged from their 50s to 70s. Several hundred travelled back to Ireland from the UK, US and Australia to describe their childhood of terror and intimidation. This time, support and opportunity must also be given by the Royal Commission.

The purification in Ireland continues and it will take a number of years to ensure that the best interests and views of children are taken into account in childcare, access, custody, guardianship and adoption cases. In the aftermath of the Ryan report's publication, the then-government and President [Mary McAleese](#) said the report could be used to bring perpetrators of child abuse to justice. Our current Taoiseach (Prime Minister) [Enda Kenny](#) in 2001 delivered a landmark speech in the Dáil (Parliament) on the publication of the [Investigation into the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne](#) pointing to a "[dysfunction](#)" that exists at the heart of the Catholic Church – the Vatican.

However it is significant to note that over three years since the publication of the Ryan Report, the Irish state has not prosecuted those priests, nuns and lay personnel that committed the crimes of rape, torture, neglect, starvation as outlined in the report. [Eleven files](#) had been forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) in relation to prosecutions on the basis of evidence provided by the Ryan report. The DPP has directed no prosecution in eight of these abuse cases and decisions are still pending on the remaining three case files. The lapse in time since the abuse took place, a lack of witnesses and a lack of evidence has hampered the ability of the State to take prosecutions.

As the Royal Commission commences its work, it is important to remember the welfare of the children currently in State care is of paramount importance. In Ireland a referendum held on October 10 this year passed the recommendation that children's rights to be enshrined into the Irish Constitution. While turnout was [significantly low \(33.5%\)](#) the amendment received all-party support and significantly, cautious support of the Catholic Church. The [amendment](#) makes it mandatory to report any complaint from any child about abuse. People working with children are now obliged by law to report any concerns those children express to them. If they receive a credible report that a child or young person has been abused they must now under law pass that on to the Gardaí (Police) and other relevant authorities.

The failure to protect children can also be attributed the Ireland's overall attitude to women, sex and morality. The Catholic Church still intervenes in social policy debates and [84% of the population](#) still identify as Catholic. The Irish State is still dependent on the Catholic Church in providing many services. Over [92% of Ireland's State](#) primary schools are still owned by the Church and run under a Catholic ethos.

Reform and change is slow but efforts have commenced to shift the ownership with pilot areas emerging across Ireland giving parents a preference on the running and ethos of schools. Ireland without doubt has a significant way to go as the process of purification continues.

[Child abuse, Royal Commission](#)