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A new symbol of false sex abuse allegations

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Next month will mark the 10-year anniversary of the explosion of the sexual abuse crisis, triggered by a January 2002 article in the *Boston Globe* on Fr. John Geoghan, accused of abusing more than 130 children over a 30-year career. (Geoghan was killed in prison in August 2003.)

Geoghan remains an appalling symbol of the church's failures. He was the archetypal serial predator, transferred from parish to parish despite repeated warnings about his crimes.

A decade into the arc of the crisis, we now have a new symbol of another of its distressing features: The way all Catholic priests have been tarred with the same brush, presumed guilty until proven innocent and often cut loose by officialdom at the first hint of an allegation.

That symbol is Fr. Kevin Reynolds of Ireland, and his is a story that merits serious reflection. Before getting into it, however, let's stipulate two points.

First, there's no moral equivalence between the agony experienced by victims of sexual abuse, especially children, and the hardships of a falsely accused priest. The point is not to compare the two things, but rather, that you can't remedy one injustice by creating another.

Second, the fact that some priests have been falsely accused does not mitigate the culpability of the church, or its leadership, for scores of other cases in which the abuse is all too real. Nor does it supply a free pass to church leaders to dismiss criticism, or to wave off arguments for reform.

That said, the Reynolds story illustrates two points that must figure on any list of lessons learned in the last decade:

- The need for more effective firebreaks against false allegations, both in the church and in the media.
- Greater support for priests facing accusations, including church leaders more inclined to balance legitimate measures of precaution when an allegation surfaces against concern for the reputation and rights of the accused party.

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Here's the story.

Fr. Kevin Reynolds, 65, was a parish priest in County Galway in Ireland who had spent most of his life working as a missionary in Kenya. In May of this year, he was featured in a widely publicized investigative program on the Irish national television network RTE, provocatively titled "Mission to Prey." The suggestion was that these Irish missionaries had gone abroad to "prey" on the locals, not to "pray" on their behalf.

The program presented seven such cases involving missionaries. Five had already been reported on in other venues, and one involved a now-deceased Christian Brother, whose order has repeatedly denied the charges. The accusations against Reynolds were therefore the program's main "smoking gun."

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Dramatically, RTE journalist Aoife Kavanagh interviewed a Kenyan woman named Veneranda, who said Reynolds had raped and impregnated her in 1982, when she was just 14. She said she gave birth to a child named Sheila as a result of the rape, who also appeared in the RTE piece. He was also accused of secretly providing money to Sheila.

Armed with those charges, Kavanagh and a film crew caught Reynolds outside his parish one day after a First Communion Mass, recording the priest's sputtering denials that he was a pedophile and a rapist.

After that exchange, but before the program aired, Reynolds sent RTE a letter from the bishop of Kakamega in Kenya, the diocese where he had served, insisting that Reynolds had a spotless record. Given recent history, RTE might be forgiven for disregarding a bishop's assurances. What should have given the network greater pause, however, was that Reynolds also volunteered to take a paternity test to demonstrate that he is not the father of the Kenyan child.

Nevertheless, the RTE broadcast went ahead, without waiting for any DNA results. In keeping with protocols established by the Irish church, Reynolds was immediately removed from his position as a pastor, forced to leave his home and his parish. The estimate is that 500,000 people saw the primetime broadcast featuring the sensational charges, and about 338,000 people listened to a radio rebroadcast the next day.

In the months since, it's become clear that the accusations are baseless. Two separate, and independent, DNA tests have established that Reynolds is not the father of the child.

Once that news became public, a political and legal melee ensued in Ireland. RTE launched an internal review, suspended the program that aired "Mission to Prey" and issued a public apology to Reynolds.

"RTE now fully and unreservedly accepts that the allegations made against Fr. Kevin Reynolds are baseless," the official apology read, "without any foundation whatever and untrue, and that Fr. Reynolds is a priest of the utmost integrity who has had an unblemished 40 year career in the priesthood and who

has made a valuable contribution to society in Kenya and Ireland both in education and in ministry."

The director-general of RTE, Noel Curran, has since called the decision to air the program "one of the gravest editorial mistakes ever made" by the network. Three separate investigations of RTE's conduct are ongoing, including one launched by the Irish government under the country's national Broadcast Authority.

This week, RTE also settled a defamation complaint brought by Reynolds. Although the amount has not been officially disclosed, the *Irish Times* has reported that it's at least one million euro, or U.S. \$1.3 million.

The key question, of course, is why RTE went ahead with the broadcast without taking up Reynolds on his offer of a paternity test.

Although nobody's issued any official answer, most observers believe the program reflected a general climate in Ireland in which priests are now seen as fair game. A recent national survey found that only 28 percent of the Irish can correctly identify the share of Irish priests who have actually been found guilty of child abuse, which stands at roughly 4 percent. Seventy percent of the Irish believe the figure is higher, with almost 50 percent believing that more than 20 percent of priests have been found guilty.

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The Association of Irish Priests, an independent group founded amid the abuse crisis, issued a statement Monday asserting the Reynolds case illustrates bias in two ways:

- "The fact that RTE were not willing to wait until Fr. Reynolds had a chance to prove his innocence suggests to us that they were confident that anything could safely be said about a priest in the present climate without fear of repercussions; that the church authorities would not back him, and that people generally would believe the story."
- "That they door-stepped Fr. Reynolds in both a time and place that is sacred to the Catholic faith. There is, we believe, no doubt that RTE, or indeed any journalist, would not do the same to an Imam in the precepts of his mosque, or to a Jewish rabbi at his synagogue."

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin said this week that while he does not believe there is a general climate of anti-Catholic bias in the media, the Reynolds case demonstrates the need for greater press accountability.

"We have to foster press freedom and respect it, but if journalists can act irresponsibly, or newspapers or public broadcasting authorities, then we need a situation where there is accountability to satisfy the public that this kind of thing can't happen to you or I," Martin said.

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Three other observations seem in order.

First, what makes this situation unique is that it pivoted on a claim that could be conclusively verified or falsified -- that Reynolds was the father of a child. Most charges of abuse aren't open to such clear resolution. Generally they pit one person's, or several persons', word against another's. Experience has taught that every such charge must be taken seriously, but the Reynolds episode also suggests a dose of caution before presuming that an accusation is automatically tantamount to guilt.

Second, it's striking that legal and logistical support for Reynolds as he fought the RTE charges came not from his own bishop, or the official structures of the church, but rather from the independent Association

of Catholic Priests.

The association has charged that Martin and some other Irish bishops have actually been "complicit in the denigration of priests," demonstrating "a serious lack of care for priests" and a willingness "to effectively demonize them in church and society." They called upon the Irish bishops to balance "systems and structures put in place to safeguard children" with a "duty of care" for their own priests.

That seems a point that some bishops around the world are ready to acknowledge.

In my recent book-length interview with Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, titled *A People of Hope*, Dolan wondered aloud if a priest "ever fully recovers" from a charge of abuse, even if a subsequent investigation shows the charge to be unsubstantiated and he's returned to ministry. Dolan, the president of the U.S. bishops' conference, endorsed the need for a better way of handling false allegations while admitting some perplexity over what exactly that might look like.

Third, the response of the journalistic community may hold larger lessons.

So far, authorities at the RTE have said none of the journalists responsible for "Mission to Prey" would be fired or otherwise disciplined, claiming that it's better under the circumstances for people to learn from their mistakes. Several of Ireland's best-known journalists and pundits have defended Kavanagh, arguing that judgments should be based on the totality of her career and not on one mistake.

All that, of course, is eerily reminiscent of how leaders of the Catholic church responded to the sexual abuse crisis in its early stages -- suggesting, perhaps, that the response of church officials had more to do with basic institutional dynamics and professional loyalties as opposed to anything specifically "Catholic."

Martin himself made the comparison.

"If this were the church, bishops would be told to voluntarily resign rather than stand aside," he said. "The level of accountability has to be questioned. It took a long time before people came and held their hands up and said, 'Look, we made a serious mistake here.'"

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To repeat, the Reynolds story does not mean the sexual abuse crisis has been overblown, nor does it suggest that most reports of abuse are false. It should not discourage real victims from coming forward, or exempt the church or its leadership from criticism.

For instance, a church-appointed review board in Ireland recently ascribed breakdowns in the Derry diocese to "errors of judgment" by three bishops. Critics have fired back, insisting these were hardly mistakes but deliberate acts of cover-up. While that may be debatable, nothing in the Reynolds case bears upon it one way or the other.

Yet the Reynolds saga does illustrate the sad truth that innocent priests have too often been forced to pay the price for the church's corporate failures. Symbolically, Reynolds serves as a potent reminder of the dangers of a rush to judgment, which does no one any good -- least of all, the victims of sexual abuse.

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