SINS of the fathers

As a royal commission investigates mounting child sex abuse allegations in the Catholic Church, Clair Weaver asks: how could these crimes be suppressed for so long?
It's a depressing measure of the scale of the sex abuse scandal engulfing the Catholic Church that news of a priest preying on a child is no longer shocking. A typical response: "Oh, another one?" Meanwhile, the dark stereotype of a paedophile lurking in young boys is practically a foregone conclusion when it comes to comedic discussions around men of the cloth. Many of us have, in short, become desensitised to one of the most brutal child sex abuse cabals in recent history.

But sometimes it takes a heartfelt personal story to cut through apathy and force change. In this case, it was the horrifying ordeal of young Daniel Feenan – abused by his trusted parish priest from the age of 12 – that was forced into the public arena in unfiltered, high-definition detail. On national TV, detective chief inspector Peter Fox described how the boy was driven to a park by Father James Fletcher and ordered to remove his pants.

"[The] priest anally penetrated him," Fox told ABC TV's Lateline. "The boy wasn't aware at that stage that his anus had been torn and he started bleeding. He was screaming in agony on the seat and his knuckles were turning white. And as the priest continued while he screamed, he said he focused on the St Christopher's cross on the dashboard and watched it swaying back and forward to try and take his focus off the pain."

It's the kind of nauseatingly graphic account we don't often see or hear in the media. Newspaper editors might deem it the sort of story that would "put people off their Corn Flakes". Some viewers, no doubt, turned off their TV. Others surely cried for Daniel, who wasn't named on the show.

Unpalatable as it may be, it's still happening. And it's the kind of evil likely to have been inflicted on thousands more Australian children – vulnerable and voiceless – at the hands of highly respected, powerful men who have supposedly dedicated their lives to doing God's work. Indeed, the extent of the scandal triggered a royal commission into child sex abuse in churches and other institutions that started early this year.

Clearly, a deeper investigation was needed: once the immediate shock of the latest revelations wore off, many of us were left baffled, and could only wonder how this happened in the first place.

"My estimate is that the Catholic Church has six times as many cases of child sex abuse by religious leaders as all other religions in Australia combined"
the University of Sydney's law faculty. Combined. That's an astonishing figure - one that firmly contradicts Cardinal George Pell's claim the church is merely being targeted unfairly by the media.

What is it about the Catholic Church in particular that seems to make this kind of behaviour more prevalent?

The culture of secrecy permeating the church has to be seriously considered. From a young age, Catholics are taught to confess their sins in a dark room, alone and through a privacy screen to a priest who then hands down a judgment that effectively "clears" one's sins. All of this is done under a seal of confidentiality, a practice that can be said to help relieve or even negate feelings of shame, fear and discomfort for perpetrators. In an extreme case that may provide some insight, a former Queensland priest admitted to going to confession more than 1500 times to admit to sexually abusing boys, only to be told to pray and then be absolved: "It was like a magic wand had been waved over me."

Cardinals, meanwhile, take a lifelong vow of secrecy when they enter the conclave, negating any possibility that brewing scandals can be handled effectively.


Assisting concealment is the fact the church largely manages itself separately from regular society. "It's an international institution that actually has its own laws, known as Canon law, and its own system of governance in the Vatican," professor Parkinson explains. "I think culturally, the Catholic Church is a law unto itself." This special status long allowed it to present a clean, pious image to the public and protect its assets, and to leave its problems and scandals firmly behind closed church doors.

But this remoteness - combined with frequently heavy-handed condemnations of modern morality and a stunning reluctance to acknowledge its own problems - only fuels claims the church is antiquated and out of touch. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, used his Christmas address to slam gay marriage and claim homosexuality is destroying "the essence of the human creature". Many would argue that child sex abuse is more destructive than allowing loving couples, irrespective of gender, to be married - and should therefore take precedence as an issue worth tackling.

We now know the church's code of silence has prevented justice from being served against paedophiles in the ranks. Even worse, it has allowed perpetrators to simply move between parishes and, more often than not, abuse even more children - in some cases for decades after the first alarm bells rang. Most recently in January, it was reported that Father Tom Knowles, a leading Australian priest who sexually preyed on a 19-year-old disabled woman in Sydney for 14 years, had been allowed to return to preaching and running community groups at Melbourne's St Francis', one of Australia's busiest Catholic churches.

Many claim the cover-up of cases of sexual abuse stretches into the highest levels of the church's hierarchy.

And secrecy, as paedophiles know, is an effective way of preventing victims from speaking out. "For Daniel," his mother Patricia tells madison, "the easiest thing would have been to [obey and] keep silent." He did just that for more than a decade.

Another powerful tool of control is fear. Catholicism is known for a black-and-white approach to morality. As a child, I can remember the school priest using his sermon to angrily condemn divorce, adultery and abortion - and feeling sorry for any classmates whose parents had committed such grave sins. Many children are understandably afraid of what they hear in teachings about concepts like sin, hell, purgatory, Satan and even God. Some victims have told of perpetrators telling them abuse was their punishment for wrongdoing.

Lawyer Judy Courtin, a PhD student at Melbourne's Monash University who is conducting research into sexual assault and the Catholic Church, compares it to being under a spell. "Think about the little brain of a young child who comes from a Catholic family and believes a priest is God's representative on earth," she
In a cruel twist, Patricia and her then-husband John agreed to send Daniel to stay at Father Fletcher's presbytery for the night after he tried to commit suicide at the age of 19. They now know that instead of getting pastoral support, he was assaulted. Again.

Rituals, often used in religions and cults alike, retain a serious power. When Daniel, now 36, recently appeared at the launch of his mother's book *Holy Hell* ($24.95, Fontaine Press), he gave the audience some insight into how he came under the priest's control.

"Daniel said 'stand up' and everyone stood up, then 'sit down' and everyone sat down," Patricia says. "He was talking about being a little kid at mass and how you just do things you are told..."

Like most Catholic mothers, Patricia was proud when Daniel was chosen to serve as an altar boy. In retrospect, she knows Father Fletcher exploited it as another way to get close to and manipulate her son. "[Daniel] didn't really know what it was about... He aspired to be an altar boy and ding the bell," she explains. "He was groomed into submission."

Today, Daniel is a father of three. He is well and happy most of the time but feels he's fallen behind where he should be in life, transforming from a happy school captain to a tormented young man who went off the rails. He endures the emotional burden of his years of abuse every day. In 2004, an unrepentant Father Fletcher was found guilty of nine charges of sexual abuse of a minor. He died in jail just over a year later.

For Patricia, the creation of a royal commission came as a relief. For others raised in the Church it was a depressing reminder of just how much a trusted institution still has to answer for.

Patricia is forever grateful to Peter Fox, who wrote an open letter to NSW premier Barry O'Farrell calling for an inquiry, a breach of police protocol. (Fox admits his career is probably over because of it.) "People hear the words 'molestation' and 'sex abuse' and think that's awful," she says, "but then [Peter] said the words about what actually happened to Daniel and it galvanised the nation into saying no, this must not be allowed to happen anymore."

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If you have been sexually abused, know someone who has, or would like more information on counselling services, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14; Lifeline Qld or Kids Helpline, 1800 55 1800; kidshealp.com.au.