

Letter Addressed to The Guardian, Oct. 2005

John Peel (*'When I was at school'* *The Guardian* 12 Oct) has done us a service in further exposing the kind of experience which, until recent years, many of us did not have a language for describing as being in any way abusive. It strikes me that what happened in boarding schools is replicated in the systemic abuse found in some of our major institutions. The Church's apparent 'gay dilemma' is displaying the fault lines of such abuse.

My journey as boarder began in the early 60's at the age of eleven. These were the most destructive years of my life. What gets frozen in those tender, formative years can take a lifetime, if ever, to thaw. By way of institutionalised abuse and neglect we were well trained in the inhibition of emotion and the disowning of feelings. Sex education was done obliquely by talks on the Immaculate Conception, totally lost on the young mind but nevertheless making it clear that sex was valued for its absence! When sex was referred to directly it was couched in the negative language of sin and temptation. The golden rule to guide us in our relating with each other was *'Rarely one, never two, always three'*, coupled with strong warnings against *'particular friendships'*. All totally baffling to the innocent mind, but once the sexual awakening of adolescence began the poison had already been laid and internal connections were made: sex is shameful and relationship is not to be trusted. We were systematically and effectively cut off from our sexuality before it even had the chance to emerge, cut off from our source of energy and self understanding – and that's before we ever go anywhere near talk of a sexual act!

Maybe it's not surprising that I have engaged in a specialised study of psychotherapy with boarding school survivors. In his enlightening book *The Making of Them* (2000) Nick Duffell eloquently describes what happens to a person whose growing sexuality is not healthily mirrored. *"If the transition is not made with dignity and respect it will mean that the emerging adult will have the opposite qualities associated with his own sexuality, primarily fear and shame"*.

I could forgive my old teachers on grounds of ignorance and lack of information. But given the huge developments in the social and psychological sciences over the last fifty years such ignorance in the present day seems culpable. The note being struck by the proposed Vatican document on gay seminarians, along with the inspection of US seminaries to search for "evidence of homosexuality", seem to indicate that shaming is still in vogue. Apparently the instruction document for the visitation of the seminaries even asks, *"Do the formation faculty members watch out for signs of 'particular friendships'?"* What friendship worthy of the name was anything other than particular? Hearing the rhetoric issuing from the Vatican is like listening to tired old seminary professors who haven't ventured outside the walls for the past fifty years and who are still peddling the same old language of sin and temptation. Far from encouraging healthy psychosexual development the whole tenor of these processes serves to reinforce alienation, and so the abuse continues.

The best confession of my adult life was to confess to the sin of self-abuse – the abuse of having swallowed such a poisonous diet. But it gets worse. We are also witnessing the invidious conflation, either by design or ignorance, of homosexual with paedophile. I appreciated William Rees-Mogg's attempt to correct this. *The right question is*, he said, *'Will the candidate for the priesthood be a potential danger to children or the young?'...The other question, 'Is the candidate homosexual?', is the wrong question, because it would do an injustice to many sorts of people, to homosexuals who suffer enough injustice in the world, to others for whom their own sexuality is uncertain, a "grey area"*. (*The Times*, 26 Sept) If such tempered wisdom is anything to go by, maybe we just need more Brits in the Vatican! Till then, how long, O Lord, are we to suffer the tyranny of psychological and emotional illiteracy?