

Re: Response from the Missionaries of Charity Brothers

I am sorry I am a few days late - the review letter from the Conference of Religious has only recently reached me.

As a Congregation with Brothers almost entirely from abroad and coming regularly into contact with children and young people in difficult circumstances, we have been significantly affected by the child protection work of the Catholic Church in the UK. When the work of COPCA started, we remained fairly traumatised by what we had been told years earlier about work with children - essentially, "Don't touch, don't go near." We had developed our own policy which was short, practical and related to the apostolates we were involved in.

I had only just met the new Child Protection officers of the Diocese and started to hear their new message when we had an unfortunate run in with them. They made a follow up assessment (according to new national policy) after a complaint about us which turned out to be a misunderstanding. It made quite a bad impression on our Brothers throughout Europe who are already wary about what they perceive as a culture of fear in the UK. It was only 2 years later, when I attended some one of the training sessions run by the Diocese that I got the message, "This is all about working well with children." I really wish we had had that message delivered first and had not had to undo the image of the Diocese being yet another `police` agency watching for us to slip up.

I must say that I personally have had a great deal of help from the CP Officers of the Diocese - I have met several times and no doubt given them several headaches. I have been very impressed with their availability for advice when we have been concerned about a child and their willingness to listen to my difficulties in implementing policy.

As we have only one community in the country with 4 to 5 Brothers, seeing all the policies in development was very daunting. If we had had to take all that on board ourselves, I think we would have packed our bags and left. It has been a great relief for us to be able to join up with the Diocese who take care of so much of the paperwork.

I have read all the national policies and found them comprehensive but too much to be taken on at a local level. I see that the Diocese we are in are managing to put it all across in a simple way. I do wish however that it was less obvious that the basis for much of the policies is that the Church doesn't get sued. I think there could be more development of skills in working with children and young people. We have a particular problem in that the policies on activities, trips etc. seem aimed at the usual Church groups. We have a lot of informal contact with young people who simply turn up at our door looking for attention - many are from troubled families, some have ASBOs, they are not a typical Church group.

They are surely the ones to whom our charism sends us. One of our brothers who has most contact with them says that he feels the policies make it difficult for him to respond in a spontaneous way to those who come. We have had a little advice on this from the Diocese, but feel that the national policies lack a sense of outreach to those who are outside the Church and outside what is normal. If we were to follow policy to the letter, we simply would not engage with these young people because so many are not really under the control of their parents.

On my most recent visit to our UK community, I was a little concerned that we had reached a transition point where our own policy had been abandoned but the new policies did not address some specific points and so they fell through a hole between two good policies.

When we have wished to raise concerns about the abuse of a child, we have found the response very good. That aspect of the new system seems to work really well - we know we can phone the Diocese and will get a response. On the downside, there was one occasion when a Brother felt he had been abused by a child and the response he got was a brief phonecall saying "write it down". He felt that there was massive support for a child, but no support for him. The Diocese did take this on board when we told them.

I hope that the focus on working well with children can really be brought to the front. I have had quite a bit of contact with two government agencies supervising work with children and I have not been terribly impressed - it was quite obvious that as long as the paperwork was alright everything else must be alright. Their approach made everything more complicated and resulted in a few children being cared for better but many children not being cared for at all. Given that background culture of being safe, I hope the Catholic Church can show that its aim is not just to be safe. I know the policies all start with a nice message but the bulk of what follows tells a different message.

Our Brothers all over the world are interested in what is happening in the UK, only in one other country we work in is there a similar set up to COPCA. I would like to be able to show them that good things are happening.

Thank you for the chance to respond.

Br Marc-Daniel Delapeyre