

Restorative Justice

The Spiritan Congregation (formerly The Holy Ghost Fathers C.S.Sp.) is today (16/11/22) announcing that independent experts are being appointed to engage with victims/survivors of historical abuse at schools and institutions run by the Congregation, formerly known as the Holy Ghost Fathers. The Congregation is also offering an apology to all victims/survivors. The apology accompanies this statement.

The announcement follows discussions and meetings with a group of past pupils of Blackrock College which have taken place since May 2021. The group that initiated the process and worked with the Spiritans comprised Corry McMahon (Class of 1978); Louis Hoffman, Philip Feddis and John Coulter (all 1979).

Commenting, the Group said the outcome 'while long overdue is welcome. For some, this is the culmination of more than a decade of work towards getting an institution to acknowledge its failings. Over the last two years we've been actively engaged with the Spiritans on the establishment of a substantive and independent process which will be led by Tim Chapman who has the requisite skills and experience. Today represents public acknowledgement of the scale of the wrongs but also the start of a process that can, we believe, help victims to find succour and hope where it has been absent for too long."

In the course of the discussions of the last few years the Spiritans and the Spiritan Provincial Safeguarding Office (SSO) were made aware that there were many victims/survivors who suffered sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual abuse (the Abuse), by Spiritans, and/or lay staff, who had not yet come forward.

The Spiritans agreed to the appointment of Tim Chapman, an independent Restorative Justice Practitioner, to facilitate an independent, victim-led, Restorative Justice process on an initial pilot programme basis. The pilot programme was set up to address the personal experiences of Abuse of a specific group, and to support justice and healing of all those who suffered Abuse. The participants in the pilot programme were primarily, but not

exclusively, pupils of Willow Park and/or Blackrock college in the 1970's and 1980's (the Pilot Group).

The pilot programme provided significant new information regarding the prevalence and harrowing nature of the incidents of the Abuse of pupils of Blackrock College and Willow Park School. Through this pilot programme, the Spiritans are now more aware that there are many victims/survivors, who suffered Abuse by Spiritans and lay staff, at all Spiritan schools, who have not come forward to report their Abuse.

Formerly, many of the victims/survivors in the Pilot Group did not feel able to be open about, or sufficiently supported, to come forward to get assistance to help address their Abuse and to begin the process of healing. The pilot programme emphasised the need for renewed efforts to encourage all those who have been abused to come forward and to be heard.

It further underlined that any Restorative Justice process is best served when it's a collaborative effort between individuals who've been harmed and those representing the institution where the Abuse occurred. Assisting the victim/survivors to address their Abuse and placing them and their needs at the centre of the process, is at the core of what it's hoped will emerge from this initiative.

The group of former Blackrock College students said, "As among those who were impacted by the abuse within our schools, we chose to work with the Spiritan (Holy Ghost Fathers) community toward the realisation of a process that would offer support to all those who have, since childhood, had to cope with the damage they've suffered from any form of abuse.

We wanted to create a greater awareness of the problem, its scale, and through the establishment of a restorative justice process, make it easier for people to come forward. This is about being heard, about being believed and about a recognition that the wrongs that were done are addressed in a fundamental manner. While we're a small group, we're representative of a much wider base of former pupils of Spiritan schools, that believes the restorative justice process which, by definition, is victim-led will go some way to address the needs of all those affected by the horror of such abuse.

We pay tribute to the many past students, aware of this initiative, who've been involved and supportive throughout. To anyone who believes that, as much of this is in the past, it would have been better left alone, we request that they review this from the victim's perspective. Our collective priority must be to assist the victims of abuse to address their trauma and to hopefully begin the long process of healing. That should be our only interest and focus. We encourage all those impacted to contact Tim Chapman to participate in the Restorative Justice process.

Under the expert leadership of Tim, the Spiritans are committed to applying the learning from the pilot programme, in its safeguarding practice, and towards the healing of victims/survivors, and we wish to engage further Restorative Justice processes in assisting victims/survivors address their incidents of Abuse.

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Given the learnings of the pilot programme the Spiritans wish to expand the Restorative Justice Process to further facilitate any and all individuals abused by Spiritans or lay staff. Victims from Spiritan schools are being encouraged to come forward and recount their experiences. As part of the process, the Spiritans will meet with participants in person and/or issue a personal apology where requested.

The Spiritans will continue to fund independent counselling services for those who have suffered abuse and will expand the services as necessary. All other forms of support continue to be available to the victims/survivors of Abuse whether they're participants of the Restorative Justice processes or come directly to the Spiritan Safeguarding Office.

The European Forum for Restorative Justice defines restorative justice as 'an approach for addressing harm or the risk of harm through engaging all those affected in coming to a common understanding and agreement on how the harm or wrongdoing can be repaired and justice achieved.'

Restorative justice connects people through a non-hierarchical and informal process through which those who suffered the abuse and those responsible for the abuse participate in dialogue rather than

being represented by professionals. The aim is to restore the relations between the participants to a quality acceptable to them. Participation is voluntary.

All victims/survivors of abuse are encouraged to consult a trained restorative practitioner without making any commitment to participate in a restorative process. If the individual chooses to proceed, the practitioner will enable him or her to prepare for a meeting with representatives of the Spiritans and the appropriate school.

Generally, people wish to describe the harm that they suffered and its impact on their lives, ask their questions and make requests which could help them recover from the harm and give them a sense of justice. The practitioner will ensure that any meeting is safe, respectful, fair and honest.

The Restorative Justice Process, that will now be available to all past pupils of Spiritan schools will be led by Tim Chapman and other restorative justice practitioners, who have worked extensively, both as practitioners and academics, in the development and facilitation of restorative justice processes. Each of these facilitators of the restorative justice process will be independent of the Congregation.

Through the process the Facilitators will engage directly, and individually, with survivors and representatives of the Spiritans, in a space considered to be suitable and safe by all participants. The individual restorative meetings are designed to address personal experiences of abuse.

The Process also includes restorative approaches to address the risk of harm. The proposed restorative group meetings should be designed to address systemic aspects of the abuse and to ensure that it never happens again in Ireland and other countries. We expect additional recommendations to emerge as outcomes of the Restorative Justice Process.

The Spiritans are inviting people who have been harmed by abuse at Spiritan schools to contact Tim Chapman, to discuss any questions, concerns and/or involvement in this process. It is intended that this phase of the process will be reviewed at the end of June 2023.

16th November 2022

To contact Tim Chapman for Restorative Justice process:

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