



## The blind eye at Ampleforth

The Roman Catholic community at Ampleforth is a strange place. At this valley in Yorkshire live a Benedictine community of brothers; monks. They also run a school. The abbot is in charge of the whole community, monastery and school.

As Benedictines, their community life is based on the Rule of St Benedict written down around 600AD. In 80 or so short pages, this piece of work carries huge spiritual wisdom, laying down everything from how to reconcile brothers at odds with each other, to how much bread is needed for a reasonable diet. I frequently recommend it to others; reading it and re-reading it is part of my own spiritual practice.

Yet in the report just revealed by IICSA, what is demonstrated is a series of abusive incidents, at the Ampleforth community mostly by teachers against pupils, but also sometimes by the Benedictine brothers themselves, which were then routinely covered up, in order to protect the reputation of the school. Several of the abuse victims went on to commit suicide.

How could people so rooted in such spiritual wisdom end up either doing such awful things, or covering up the things committed by others?

Partly this was to do with the overriding desire to protect the reputation of the institution. Partly this was to do with the belief in rehabilitation of sinners, who were truly penitent, and should be forgiven.

But I realise, on reading over the Rule again, that there is an immense gap, which is on how to live sexually. The sexual aspect of life simply is not discussed in the rule; it is as if it does not exist.

And the Roman Catholic church for a long time has attempted to live like this. The consequences are only now becoming clear.

What is described at Ampleforth is only something that has been replicated in other Catholic institutions around the world. In America, two weeks ago, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was asked by Pope Francis to resign. He now faces a litany of charges of sexual misconduct with minors, but his more common crime was, Kevin Spacey-like, assaulting attractive young men, typically seminarians.

In the Catholic world, there essentially is no proper sexual behaviour (except for conception of children in wedlock). Was McCarrick himself a victim, a victim of a church that refused to allow a healthy, open sexual relationship, forcing him into covert liaisons, which he got used to as he was the one with power?

A half-recognition of this failure led to a shadowy world of sexual encounters, to which people preferred to turn a blind eye, and in their blindness, there was no distinction between the abusive and the healthy. The rule itself states, "Idleness is the enemy of the soul." In this case, the enemy of the soul has been pretending an area of life does not exist.

*August 2018. for the Train is a short column by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*