

Ritual Apology:

When one of your children hurts another child, be it a sibling or friend, you will typically ask your child to do two things – apologise for the hurt caused and make amends in some way. For small children it might be “Now give your little sister a hug and say you are sorry”. For older children it may involve some repair of the damage like “Now shake hands and give your brother half of your bar of chocolate” or “Don’t just say sorry, say it like you mean it. Now try again”, says the mother. For younger teens, when there are more serious incidents, most parents will be familiar with the situation where they accompany their young teen to the door of a neighbour to apologise for some wrong done.

In all of these parenting situations the parent realises that to repair hurt caused two things are required – a verbal apology and a ritual apology. The ritual apology is having the offender do something visible and concrete that enacts the apology. It is the hug, the shake hands, the walk to the neighbour’s front door, etc.

In the twelve-step program of AA there is a crucial step to recovery where the alcoholic has to “make amends for past wrongs”. It is a powerful step because not only must the alcoholic apologise for his past wrongs, he/she must make amends for them. In other words, a verbal apology is never sufficient,. What is required is some form of repair, reparation, or atonement. It is in this visual and enacted ritual of regret that the victim sees and experiences the efforts made to communicate regret. This is very much more than verbal apology.

In your intimate relationships you also know this to be true. When you hurt your spouse or partner it is usually not enough to just give a verbal apology, what is needed is some small ritual of repair: A hug, a cup of tea made a phone call during the day, a small symbolic gift, or if the hurt causes is more serious, a heartfelt display of emotion and regret is accompanied by a suitable gesture.

For these obvious yet profound psychological reasons I believe that what is required of the religious orders and church as a whole, following the publication of the Ryan report into the abuse of children in industrial schools, is not just a verbal apology but a ritualised and enacted apology. There is a world of a difference between a verbal apology and a ritual apology.

The Catholic Church is steeped in a tradition of symbolism and ritual. It knows, as it has for many centuries, that humankind responds and communicates more through symbol and ritual than through language. Obvious symbols such as crosses, spires, collars, veils, rosary beads, etc all communicate far more than is explainable through words. It has been deeply disturbing that in many instances of the abuse of children, the symbols themselves were used by perpetrators to inflict psychological control and shame on the victim. Some close friends of mine who are religious have found this to be one of the most difficult things to contemplate in all of this.

One of the horrific things about the abuse in these schools is how it became ritualised itself. That is, the abuse itself has a predictable, repetitive, and controlling effect on the children to such a degree that it became a way of life. When abuse becomes ritualised

it reaches another level all together where the soul and not only the body of the child is colonised.

For all these reasons, it is my view that what is required of the religious now is to ritualise their apology in a way that is visible, enacted, and symbolised. A ritualised apology carries far greater power than a verbal one. All of the religious orders, and the church as a whole, should surely, by way of public ritual, symbolically if not literally wash the feet of its victims and reverse the old order as the Christ did on that Thursday.

Something like this would enact the apology, regret, shame, and felt responsibility and move it out of the realm of money, legalities, and words to that of a visible human atonement.

Bertie Aherne has been applauded for his verbal apology to victims some time ago on behalf of the state. A verbal apology, to me, is entirely meaningless, unless it is accompanied by a ritual and display of shame and responsibility. A verbal apology may be, in fact, an avoidance of the real spiritual and psychological requirement at times such as this: A fierce, uncompromising, and ultimately inspiring ritual of carried responsibility and profound regret. In other words, the perpetrator must be seen to feel the shame of his victim in order to take it back.

This is not about a public humiliation, it is about making amends, about standing before ones brothers and sisters and, like a small child does with it a best friend, makes amends and shows, with a deeply felt grief, that he/she is truly sorry. Children know this invisible language so well.

A little 5 year old girl carried on the shoulders of her loving Dad through the sun-filled Lee fields will remember the moment more than all her father's advice and explanations. Love needs to be enacted.