

# Stay under the cross

**Bishop Karel Choennie of Paramaribo, Suriname tackled the issue of paedophilia in last Sunday's diocesan weekly, *Omhoog*. The article was translated from Dutch to English and edited.**

**D**uring the 67th plenary meeting of the Antillean Bishops' Conference in Aruba (April 23-28), the reflection was provided by psychologist, Fr Gerard McGlone SJ.

He again brought up the subject of sexual abuse within the Church, but the important question he raised is how this crushing scandal can be transformed by the Church so that it can once again be meaningful to the world. He did so based on Ron Rolheiser's article 'On Carrying the Scandal Biblically' (2002).

## Paedophilia is a disease

There are many misunderstandings about the disease paedophilia. We must therefore expose how widespread it is in our culture, what its characteristics are, what the utter destruction it wreaks on its victims and what help they need.

## Prevalence figures

Although the figures come from North America, we can assume that they are not much different from other parts of the world. One out of every four or five American boys and girls is traumatised to some degree by sexual assault on their way to adulthood. (In Suriname - according to the latest research - one in six children are sexually abused. That amounts to 13 per cent of all children in our country.)

It is a massive problem. Sexual violence by priests amounts to 0.01 per cent, yet the reports make it seem as if it only occurs in Church circles.

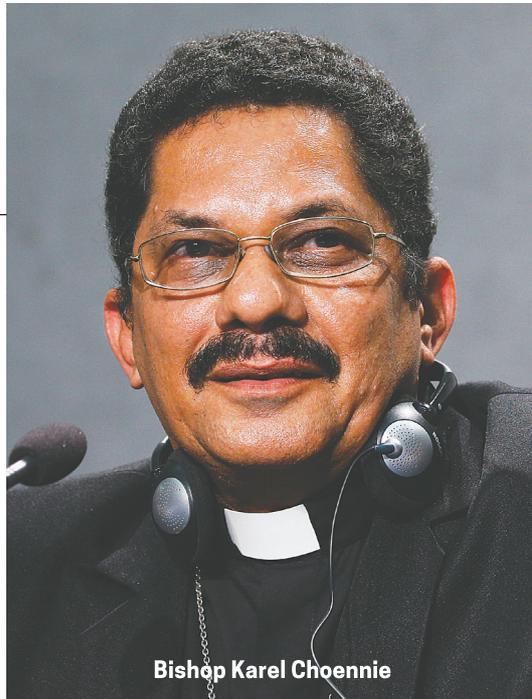
It's a disease just like alcoholism. It took a long time for alcoholism to be classified as a disease. Until then, it was thought that it was a lack of willpower to stop. But just as alcoholics are resourceful to hide and deny their addiction, so are paedophiles. Bishops have erred because they believed that if a paedophile priest said he would never do it again, he would abide by it.

Now that paedophilia is seen as a disease, it must also be treated. However, the shame is so great that the bishops, after handing over the case to the judiciary, no longer want to look at it. The disgrace and damage are so great that the perpetrators are left to fend for themselves.

## What are the causes of paedophilia?

There is consensus among scientists that paedophilia is caused by childhood trauma. In many cases, the perpetrators themselves have been victims of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is the worst violence in the world against the soul of a human being. No other crime comes even close to the devastation it wreaks.

The trauma is so great that the victims often completely suppress the memory while perpetrators develop mechanisms to



Bishop Karel Choennie

**By facing the pain, we will heal.**

deny their actions with a straight face.

A paedophile is attracted to a child who has not yet reached puberty and why? The literature on this says that the attraction is not related to sex itself but to being their own child that they lost during their traumatic experience.

We should never underestimate the damage that sexual abuse causes to children. It is the worst form of violence against the soul; it tears the soul to pieces. It is believed that many cases of depression and suicide among teens are related to sexual abuse. The traumatic consequences can sometimes be lifelong.

## What do the victims want from the Church and society?

When victims are asked what they want, the first thing that comes up is that they want to be recognised. They want acknowledgment that the abuse has occurred, and that accountability and an apology be made.

Usually, the perpetrator will never do that himself. The bishop or someone else in authority will have to make these apologies.

It is certainly not enough to make a criminal case out of it. Bishops are afraid to contact the victims because the lawyers advise against it, but it appears to be absolutely necessary to start a healing process.

Victims ask something else. They ask us not to be afraid of their anger. They can be very angry and even furious. It may take a very long time, but we must not run away and leave them alone with their anger.

## Mary under the cross

Not only has the sexual abuse scandal bankrupted some dioceses financially, but far worse, many dioceses are now morally bankrupt. The Church has lost its credibility because of this crisis. The shame is so great that we prefer to run away from it and not face the suffering. How should we handle this situation?

The first image presented to us bishops was the scene from the Gospel of John in which Mary and the Beloved Disciple stand under the cross of Jesus.

Mary is under the cross. This is a biblical way of expressing Mary taking in suffering. She had been told very early on that a sword would pierce her heart (Lk 2:35). She doesn't protest, she doesn't say anything, she just stands there.

Standing still is a sign of strength. What does it mean that she considered all this in her heart? It means that she endures and transforms everything so that she does not repay in kind.

The Church must not now run away from the suffering that has been caused. It is good that the Church feels helpless under the

cross, without power or prestige. By feeling the pain of the victims, we will find ways to meaningfully address this greater evil of paedophilia and other forms of sexual violence around the world.

Our first responsibility remains the victims and the first act of love is to listen. Listen to what they have to say to us.

The second responsibility is to the perpetrator, who is also a victim of previous sexual violence or other childhood trauma. The Church must help break this vicious circle. We must not think that the perpetrators come out of prison cured. The disease continues to fester.

The second image that was presented to us is the painting by Caravaggio in which the risen Lord Jesus takes Thomas' hand and puts it in the wound and holds it.

By facing the pain, we will heal.

We must overcome the urge to walk away and do something else because this problem is way too big. It is very difficult to stay close to the victims, especially when their anger seems to have no end. Dare to put your finger on the sore spot or there will be no healing.

Hail Mary  
Full of Grace



Our Lady of Fatima

FATIMA DEVOTIONS  
ST. BENEDICTS RC  
LA ROMAINE, SAN FERNANDO

Friday May 12<sup>th</sup>  
Tuesday June 13<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday July 13<sup>th</sup>  
Monday August 14<sup>th</sup>  
Wednesday September 13<sup>th</sup>  
Friday October 13<sup>th</sup>

May to September: The Holy Rosary at 5:30pm  
and Holy Mass at 6pm

The month of October to be announced.

Please bring a flower for Our Lady 