

The abuse of priests against the children is enough to 'kill the faith' – Mgr Scicluna

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As Malta braces for the priestly abuse court verdict today, veteran Vaticanologist Andrea Tornielli speaks to Monsignor Charles Scicluna, the man who for almost a decade now has fought alongside Ratzinger in the battle against the pedophilia

In an interview carried on the website Vatican Insider, run by La Stampa, Sig. Tornielli speaks to Mg Scicluna about the continuing scandals related to priestly abuse, to which Malta is not immune.

To gain access to the places where he works, accompanied by a select few collaborators, Mgr Scicluna has to use a magnetic card. Who would have thought that behind that light coloured wooden door which overlooks the internal portico on the first floor of the Holy Office building was the room that held the dossiers on the most delicate and scorching of cases - the abuse of minors by priests and prelates.

Monsignor J. Scicluna, the “promoter of justice” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the man who for almost a decade now has fought alongside Ratzinger in the battle against the “filth” that is dishonouring the Church, does not in any way resemble an inquisitor: he is friendly, smiley, direct and not at all priest like. “I was born in Toronto in 1959 to Maltese parents who had emigrated there. But before my first birthday I returned to Malta with my family and that is where I grew up...” Scicluna pauses. “Well...how much I actually grew I’m not sure”, he adds, referring to his stature.

At the age of 19, having started a university degree in law, he decided to enter the seminary. “I had been a member of the “Legion of Mary” for many years, I recited the rosary every day and exercised the apostolate, but I wanted to be a lawyer”. After a couple of years the archbishop of Malta allowed his seminarian to also complete his legal studies at the lay university. This choice served Scicluna extremely well with regard to his CV, forced as he had been to become a bit of a Sherlock Holmes: “The Lord obviously had plans of his own...”

After he was ordained a priest in 1986, he went to study in Rome, where he obtained a degree in Gregorian Canon law having been taught by professor Navarrete (future cardinal), and having had his thesis revised by the American monsignor Leo Burke (also a future cardinal). His superiors noticed him immediately. “They wanted me to stay in Rome, in the Apostolic Signature, but the archbishop called me to Malta, where I taught at the university for five years, I held the role of “defender of the bond” in marriage annulment cases, I worked in the parish”.

In 1995, after insistent requests from Rome, Scicluna finally gave in and became “replacement promoter of justice” of the Apostolic Signature, the Pope’s Supreme Court. “In 2001, after publication of the motion itself, with which Pope John Paul II called for all trials regarding clerics’ abuse of children to be held at the Holy See, cardinal Ratzinger was put in charge of setting up the new court.

Unfortunately, at the time he couldn’t have imagined how much work was involved in this”, explains Scicluna. The Maltese monsignor thus became one of the future Pope’s closest collaborators and in 2002 was nominated as “promoter of justice” at the former Holy Office. Thanks to the new laws, all dead case files were opened again. Investigations were also reopened and finally, two years later, the Congregation started checking up on the Legion of Christ founder, Father Marcial Maciel. “A deep understanding grew between myself and cardinal Ratzinger who did not have a Canonical background but placed his trust in me nevertheless”.

When the question about what it had meant in terms of his life path, to be involved in these huge scandals, is asked, his face turns serious: “I understood that the Church did not crumble, despite these scandals, and this is precisely because its foundations are supernatural. There is no other way to explain it.”

“The Church – continues Scicluna – considers children’s’ innocence to be one its most precious treasures, and Benedict XVI’s leadership was and is vital. He had the courage to say: we have made a mistake here, here we need to change...” This is precisely what Ratzinger was referring to in his famous meditations for the Via Crucis on Holy Friday back in 2005, when he spoke of the “filth” that existed in the Church: “Those words came from three years of abuse case study; there was an awareness of the need to see priests’ sins for what they really were”.

Over the past few days, during his presentation of an international seminar dedicated to the fight against child abuse by priests due to take place at the Pontifical Gregorian University in February 2012, Scicluna used strong words to underline the fact that violence shown towards minors by clergymen constitutes “an abuse of spiritual power”. “Yes, it is true – adds the Maltese prelate – there is a specific difference between repeated abuse by a lay person and that carried out by a priest, on victims that expect to see in them the figure of the “good shepherd”. Scicluna’s face darkens and he looks saddened. “If a priest commits the abuse, the trauma caused to the victim is even deeper, the spiritual trust that existed is destroyed and a person’s faith is lost.”

We ask the “promoter of justice” whether the change in mentality that Benedict XVI has asked for, is taking root in the Church. “I believe – he says in a faint voice – that a change in mentality is only possible for those who have the courage to meet the victims of abuse, to welcome them and to listen to their stories. If this does not happen, one may have read up on every detail of the scandal, be fully prepared, but that person will not be able to fully comprehend the trauma that these immense sins cause. The reaction and anger

expressed by the victims of priests is unlike that found in any other type of case, because it comes from deep within the soul”.

For this reason, reveals Scicluna, the bishops that will be participating in the seminar in February 2012 will need to have met with the victims of paedophile priests in their respective countries, prior to attending. “It is a traumatic experience that is life changing, as in my case. Thanks to God, to the strict laws that are in place and to the development of a new conscience, these cases have decreased dramatically compared to previous years. We need to continue to support the victims who have for so long been seen as “threats” to the good name of the Church, instead of being treated as individuals who have been wounded in their innermost soul. We need to welcome and help these victims ensuring above all that the traumatic experiences they have been through are not repeated”.

Scicluna stands up and accompanies his guest out of the office, into the portico, as far as the lift. A breath of fresh air beneath the warm June sun in Rome, before Monsignor Scicluna must return once more to the sea of letters describing an abyss of the most vile sins.