

This morning five more children have been baptised into membership of Christ's body - the Church. Once again we have prayed for the homes of these children. We have sought promises that they will be brought up with Christian standards and nurtured in belief in Christ as Saviour of the world. We have said that we will do all that we can to assist the parents and sponsors, so that when the children determine they will be brought to the bishop to be confirmed.

There are two questions which have been exercising my mind about this service. What sort of a world is it that we are sharing with them, and what sort of education will they need to cope with the future?

At a time which is more divisive than ever in the history of education in Northern Ireland - I have seen no reputable evaluated description of what the world is going to be like for these children, and what educational skills they will need to adapt to it, and earn a living in it.

And as regards the world into which they have been born at international level this past week there has been an escalation of nuclear power, as another nation enhances its nuclear arsenal.

Closer to home in the United Kingdom and in Ireland there have been two seismic movements in both states. In Britain the state of the body politic has been rocked as never before. The Daily Telegraph is now on Day 24 of its exposure of Members of Parliament, too many of whom have been on the gravy train in one coach or another. What an example to set the young of their constituencies.

Closer to home the island has been rocked by the scale of child abuse in the homes under the control of

religious orders. It is a long time since I have seen a double page of letters in the Irish Times and all of them on the one subject and most of them quite angry indeed.

In terms of UK politics I am certain that this is not the time to be panicked into making major changes in the way in which the Houses of Parliament goes about business. I can think of nothing worse than forty or fifty celebrity MPs arriving on the scene. We need people and parties that are fit to govern and fit to be in opposition. That a number of MPs have used or abused the system of expense claiming, should not be used to make significant changes in how the Houses are composed, or in how they do their parliamentary business.

The area of abuse in the churches is one in which I did spend a considerable period of my professional life. As part of that over ten years ago I met with victims in the Republic and with a group appointed by the Catholic Church whose work helped lead to this most recent report.

Believe me, you do not meet victims of abuse of any age without it searing your soul and affecting every fibre of your being. You will do all you reasonably can to prevent any child, youth or adult being so victimised. But nothing could have prepared us for such a detailed and extensive catalogue of abuse such as has been published last week.

As we look at both areas - politics and the church - it is vital that we recognise that there have been in both places people whose behaviour and witness must be appreciated and commended. I look at people like Vince Cable, Ian Duncan Smith and others whose financial stewardship has been impeccable - and

closer to home Lady Sylvia Hermon came out as an exemplar to many of the Tory MPs her party is now in alliance with.

It has been a tough two weeks not only for the victims but for those who currently bear responsibility for the leadership of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Cardinal Brady of Armagh and Bishop Noel Treanor of our sister dioceses of Down and Connor, have spoken and in language which is clear . They have expressed genuine remorse. They have stated further action to enable the victims is required, and that endeavours have been made and will continue in other areas of church life to protect the vulnerable.

This is the outcome of a historic burden which the Catholic Church carried at a specific time in Ireland's history - and I for one think it is important to say to Bishop Noel, his clergy and people, our neighbours in our local dioceses, that we acknowledge your great hurt, that we will continue to pray for you, your clergy and your church. And that we do so non-judgmentally. We too are sinners.

I feel led to say this because in this Catholic diocese of Down and Connor I have been privileged over the years of my ministry to have many friends amongst its clergy. I have sat in parochial houses when this matter, this gathering storm, has been discussed by priests in my presence. Discussed by men whose ministry would grace any christian denomination through their devotion and commitment to the one Christ we all seek to serve.

I have heard, long before last week, their pain, their anger, their despair and their determination. These are men who have served this community well, building bridges of reconciliation, enabling economic

development cross - community and working consistently for peace. They are our friends, neighbours and fellow Christians - and I commend them to your prayers at present because there will be people throughout this community who will seek warped satisfaction in attacking all clergy for the sins of some.

Please pray for our political representatives, and for the clergy and leaders of all churches. Please pray especially for those who work within the churches to make them truly safe places for all children, young adults and other members. Please pray for the victims of abuse.

Parliament must be sleaze free if those in it are to dare to legislate for the rest of us.

Churches must be places where the example of Christ is upheld and respected.

In your prayers continue to see our Saviour and Lord bringing a child into the midst of his followers and declaring that that child in its trust, and in its vulnerability, is the greatest exemplar of the Kingdom of God. And those who offend against one such - well their condemnation will be by Christ himself and it will far outstrip the words of the most sincere and the most repentant of Church leaders and bishops.

People living lives of integrity in politics, the church, and throughout civic society - in homes, schools and places of employment and recreation - are needed as never before. These children baptised in the name of the welcoming Christ have that entitlement. They need people in whom they can see Christ. Remember them and their parents in your prayers... these very special five children baptised on the Feast of Pentecost, the

birthday of the church of Christ. May the Holy Spirit come, cleanse us, restore us, inspire us, and guide us. May we be equal to the task of showing in our lives the face of Christ to these children.