

Pastoral Supervision Using a Group Format:

A Report on a Pilot Project

*John Francis Collins and Debra Snoddy**

Introduction

Extensive investigation into the issue of sexual abuse in institutional settings in the Catholic Church in Australia and beyond has shocked the church into action. The sins of commission and omission by Catholic clerics in relation to the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable people is now common knowledge. In the Australian context the report of the five-year-long Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse began on 13 January 2013. On 15 December 2017 the Royal Commission presented its final report to the Australian Governor-General, detailing the culmination of that inquiry.

Of the eighty recommendations made by the Royal Commission to the Catholic Church of Australia, seventy-eight have been accepted by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference and Catholic Religious Australia. Recommendations concerning the Holy See have been forwarded to Rome by the bishops' conference. Prior to the Royal Commission the requirements and recommendations listed in the 2004 document *Integrity in Ministry*, for the most part, had been adopted by clergy and religious in Australia, though with professional pastoral supervision acting as a conspicuous outlier. Since 2021 the process of rolling out mandatory pastoral supervision has been both patchy, in that each diocese is responsible for the implementation of a national policy, and slow, in that even in the dioceses where considerable resources have been

* Dr Debra Snoddy is a lecturer in biblical studies at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and University of Notre Dame Australia and is currently a supervisor-in-training with Transforming Practices Inc. and an associate member of AAOS (Australasian Association of Supervision). Rev. Dr John Francis Collins is a deacon in the Diocese of Parramatta. He has previously worked in pastoral formation for ministerial students and is currently the registrar for Transforming Practices Inc. and an accredited supervisor with AAOS.

employed to promote pastoral supervision amongst clergy, the uptake has been very sluggish.

Professional supervision is an ordinary component of the work culture for those working in human or social services. Yet, for some clergy, the term 'supervision' appears to be a barrier: the term has the connotation of checking up or evaluation, to which such clergy reply that they are responsible to their bishop only. While there has been debate in the field about the term 'supervision', the current consensus is to retain the term 'pastoral supervision', because it is consistent with clinical supervision accessed by other professionals working in human services, such as psychotherapists, counsellors and social workers.

The Group Supervision Project

The group supervision pilot project was designed to test a model of group pastoral supervision that could meet the needs of clergy and foster collegiality and pastoral growth among them. The model used in this project draws on insights from the fields of spiritual direction, supervisory practice and the human sciences, and reorients them in the light of the Gospel. The project consisted of developing, piloting, and evaluating a pastoral supervisory program to establish a supervision and support system within a group setting. The pilot employed a facilitative model of group work direction-supervision, co-facilitated by a male and a female.¹ The process employed was particularly alert to an adult life-cycle developmental model.

Through the support of the Episcopal Vicar for Clergy of the Diocese of Parramatta (Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains), deacons and priests from the diocese were invited to participate in a six-session study to test the effectiveness of pastoral supervision offered in a group format. The study was conducted by *Working Together Consultancy* over six months and consisted of one ninety-minute session per month. Group membership settled on four deacons and two priests from the Diocese of Parramatta and one deacon from the Archdiocese of Sydney. Each participant completed a *Pastoral Supervision Confidentiality Consent Form*. Five sessions were conducted physically in person at a diocesan centre, with the sixth session conducted online by Zoom, due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The sessions were conducted in a manner conducive to prayerful sharing and respectful listening. For the first five sessions, a sacred space was prepared

1. 'The results of twelve studies indicate that (a) gender influences the openness and affiliation one experiences in supervision, (b) care and concern are important to master-level supervisees, (c) female supervisors have a greater relationship focus than do male supervisors, (d) male supervisors rate hypothetical supervisees more negatively when the supervisee is depicted as female than when the supervisee is male, (e) females are more conservative than males on boundary negotiations, and (f) supervisors [both male and female] use different strategies with male and female supervisees.' See Yvonne L. Hindes and Jac J. W. Andrews, 'Influence of Gender on the Supervisory Relationship: A Review of the Empirical Research from 1996 to 2010', 'Influence du genre sur la relation de supervision: Survol de la recherche empirique de 1996 à 2010', *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy / Revue canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie* 45, no. 3 (2011): 240–61.

in the middle of a socially distanced circle of chairs. Picture symbols were used to create an entry point prompting sharing among participants. Two participants shared a case each during a ninety-minute session, with a brief gap between cases. In all, twelve cases were shared by participants.

The pilot employed an action-research methodology in that, after the initial structure of the sessions was outlined, the facilitator-researchers were attentive to feedback from the group members. While the basic structure of the modified Balint model was used for critical reflection on practice, some elements of the process were modified in the first three sessions. It was possible to conduct the sixth and final session satisfactorily online via Zoom, because we had already met physically in person five times. Testing the feasibility and efficacy of conducting group pastoral supervision via Zoom is potentially a future research project. Conducting the final session online via Zoom did create an opportunity to record verbal feedback as one source of data for evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of the pilot project.

The Nuts and Bolts of the Process in Parramatta Diocese

While the group in this pilot project included seven participants and two group leaders, pastoral supervision groups may usefully accommodate a minimum of six participants and a maximum of ten, plus two group leaders. Ideally, one of the group leaders is a member of the clergy with skills, experience, and expertise in group facilitation and the other a woman with professional training and experience in group therapy or facilitation. It is presumed that those making up a group are in pastoral contact with parishioners, teachers, agency staff members, or other diocesan or religious personnel. Group members present current pastoral situations that give them cause for thought (not necessarily a problem); typically they give rise to puzzlement, difficulty, distress, interest or surprise; and such situations are presented orally, without the use of documents.

The sessions are not for the personal therapy of group members. Discussion in the group focuses on issues and/or relationships between the group member and the relevant parishioner/s, staff member/s or others, to clear up matters of 'fact'—but only those bearing on the relevant relationship. The primary task is working through the needs of the parishioner/s or other person/s presented by the group member, rather than those of the group members. The purpose of the group supervision is to increase the 'client's' (group member's) *understandings* of problems, disruptions and irruptions—not to find solutions or give advice—and to consider 'what's really going on'.

To facilitate the smooth running of the group process there are some standard small-group rules. First, each session is ninety minutes, which allows for one or two cases per session, depending on the complexity of the cases presented. Second, the supervisors are responsible for keeping the group focused

on the task/problem at hand rather than on the personality of either the minister or the other person in the case study. The process develops in three phases: (1) support for the priest, deacon or other pastoral practitioner, (2) empathy for the party who is the subject of the case, (3) reflection about the emotional interaction between the pastoral practitioner and the other person. With this understanding of how the sessions work, what are we doing when we do pastoral supervision?

What Is Pastoral Supervision?

Supervision is a way of learning from experience. It is a relationship whereby supervisor and client engage in an enquiry into workplace events and practices in order to be more effective.² Supervision is a way of reflection, identification, awareness-raising, naming and questioning the workplace reality with its challenges and achievements. While supervision is concerned with pastoral practice, there might also be an occasion to bring personal issues related to the client's pastoral practice into the supervisory space. Supervision is *not* counselling, spiritual direction or psychotherapy. Rather, it is a process of structured reflection on experience that offers accountability, feedback and insight, and explores strategic ideas for better work practices. Paramount for this to happen is that supervisors recognise their own limits and offer referrals when appropriate to other professional service providers.

The Group Supervision Process

The normal mode for pastoral supervision is one to one, either face to face or, if distance is an issue or an epidemic intervenes, online via Zoom. Pastoral supervision offered in a group mode is relatively rare.

One important element that is essential to note is that the supervisors are not there to fix things! Both the members of the group and the supervisors are there to provide peer support so that the client may learn from experience. For this to happen, the supervisors' role in this process is to provide a safe environment. The primary task for the client is to explore as fully as possible the frustrations, disruptions and interruptions that are becoming problematic for them in their work in a ministry context. As such, group supervision is *not* group therapy! That said, if clients request or are assessed to have need of a more therapeutic form of learning, supervisors may assist in finding a model of therapy that best suits supervisees' needs.

Clients are informed that the group works best when it is cohesive, reliable, and predictable. Regular attendance is key for this, and participants are encouraged to make attendance a priority in their schedule. Another aspect of helping the group to work well for the benefit of all clients is for them to participate actively, which can help demonstrate respect for the work of each

2. See M. Carroll, 'One More Time: What Is Supervision?', *Psychotherapy in Australia* 13, no. 3 (2007): 36.

member. Moreover, clients are asked to arrive on time for the start of each session to help ensure that each session ends on time.

The Balint Method

This pilot project used a modified Balint model—which, as far as we are aware, is the only instance of such a program being used in a Catholic context in Australia. The Balint group was designed to provide clinical supervision for family doctors. The group and the method are named after Michael Balint, a psychoanalyst who was originally from Hungary.

With his wife, Enid, Michael Balint started a series of seminars in London in the 1950s with the aim of helping GPs (family physicians) to reach a better understanding of what they called ‘the psychological aspect’ of general practice. The method consisted of case presentation followed by general discussion with the emphasis on the emotional content of the doctor-patient relationships. Although Michael and Enid Balint were psychoanalysts, their aim was not to turn family doctors into psychotherapists but to help them to become more psychologically aware physicians.³

Following the art of psychoanalysis, Michael Balint ‘encouraged the group members to use free association when responding to the case study, to voice emotions, fantasies and any thought coming to mind without any censorship’.⁴ Balint wanted group members to ‘think fresh’, and to have ‘the courage of their own stupidity’.

While the method has its origin in providing supervision of medical doctors, it is not difficult to see how the method might be used with clergy. With feedback from the group, the priest or deacon presenter receives a complex and colourful picture of his interaction with the parishioner, team member or perhaps family member or friend, and gains insight about his own part in the underlying dynamics. He can develop a fresh perspective on the problems or the persons involved.⁵ One of the most noteworthy effects of group work—as Balint put it—is ‘a limited but significant change in the doctor’s personality’.⁶

Loneragan’s Scale of Values

Part of the supervision process is to understand the person in their context. Rather than a therapeutic or problem-based approach, this model of supervision is grounded in the scale of values as outlined by Bernard Loneragan. For

3. John Salinsky, ‘Balint Groups and the Balint Method’, <https://balint.co.uk/about/the-balint-method/>.

4. Salinsky, ‘Balint Groups and Balint Method’.

5. See H. Otten, *The Theory and Practice of Balint Group Work: Analyzing Professional Relationships* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2017), 30.

6. Otten, *Theory and Practice of Balint Group Work*, 33.

Loneragan, feelings respond to values in accord with a scale of preference, with vital, social, cultural, personal, and religious values, in ascending order.⁷ At times all values work in harmony. At other times one or other value can become a source of distress or disharmony.

The personal, the existential, may be seen at the heart of pastoral supervision. 'Personal value is the person in [their] self-transcendence, as loving and being loved, as originator of values in [their]-self and in [their] milieu, as an inspiration and invitation to others to do likewise'.⁸ As an originator of values the person in their self-transcendence 'can be principles of benevolence and beneficence, capable of genuine collaboration and of true love'.⁹ This 'heart' space is in an interweaving dynamic relationship with vital, social, cultural, and religious values.

The *vital values* of 'health and strength, grace, and vigour, [are] normally ... preferred to avoiding the work, privations, [and] pains involved in acquiring, maintaining, restoring them'.¹⁰ How we are—healthy, strong, or not—is fundamental to who and how we are in ministry. Concretely, issues of sleep, diet, recreation, use of one's day off, and holidays are potential supervisory topics in relation to this value.

Social values, such as the good of order, create the environment in which the vital values of the whole community might be met. In the context of pastoral supervision, what this means for the minister is that he or she has access to adequate material resources: office space, IT support, easy access to transport consistent with the demands of ministry, and sufficient personnel to complete the necessary tasks comprising their role. In a pastoral context it is not unheard of for personnel *not* to be replaced once transferred or for extra roles to be allocated to pastoral ministers.

Concerning *cultural values*, Lonergan asserts that 'over and above mere living and operating, [humans] have to find a meaning and value in their living and operating'.¹¹ In the context of pastoral supervision, what this means for ministers is that they have a safe space to give voice to doubts, fears, questions, and concerns with regard to why they are doing what they are doing. This space allows them to begin to explore emerging questions of meaning and value as they reflect on their ministry and life.

Returning to the heart or personal values: it is one thing for the person to be an originator of values occasionally, by fits and starts; it is another to do it regularly, easily, spontaneously.¹² This requires both effort and time, and this is why pastoral supervision is important for all involved in ministry. 'It is, finally,

7. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: DLT, 1972).

8. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 31.

9. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 35.

10. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 31.

11. It is for this reason that social values are 'to be preferred to the vital values of individual members of the community'. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 31.

12. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 31.

only by reaching the sustained self-transcendence of the virtuous [person] that one becomes a good judge, not on this or that human act, but on the whole range of human goodness'.¹³

To maintain this self-transcendence the virtuous person is sustained by *religious values*. It is religious values that form the ground of the meaning and value of the person's life and world. Religious values also provide the orientation in terms of a person's ultimate horizon. Thus, religious values rank highest in the ascending scale of values. In the engagement of pastoral supervision, this is often the value that is expressed most easily by clients, and there is the potential risk of crossing into the field of spiritual direction. It is for this reason then that the boundaries of pastoral supervision must be clearly established at the beginning of the pastoral supervision relationship. That said, there may be an occasion in the context of supervision when the supervisory process overlaps with elements of spiritual direction. When this occurs, it is incumbent on the supervisor to name the change of emphasis and seek permission from the supervisee to overlap into this domain.

The Johari Window

This psychological tool also informs the supervision process.¹⁴ The tool is based on a two-dimensional contingency table that correlates what one knows or does not know about oneself (on one axis) with what others know or do not know about oneself (on a second, intersecting axis); thus making four contiguous zones. Three of these zones of awareness or knowledge can be explored in the context of pastoral supervision; and these zones are the zones from which most people minister.¹⁵ The first is the *normal* operational zone, or the *open* zone, where things are known to all (the client and others). The second is called the *blind* zone, where things are known to others but not to the client. If a supervisor observes the impact of psychic elements in the supervisee of which the supervisee is unaware, the supervisor may recommend that the supervisee access some psychotherapeutic treatment, as appropriate. The third, the *hidden*, zone encompasses things that are known by the supervisee but remain unknown to others.

Before any exploration of these zones of knowledge can begin, it is necessary to create a safe space to help clients reflect on themselves in their ministry. When clients enter into the supervisory space, it enables their exploration of the open, blind, and hidden zones of themselves in the context of their work practices. In this context supervisors are mindful of their duties of appropriate disclosure and of having informed clients of this in advance. The

13. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 35.

14. The Johari window was devised by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955. It is a simple and useful tool for understanding and training. See Apricot Training Management Ltd, 'Understanding the Johari Window Model', <https://www.selfawareness.org.uk/news/understanding-the-johari-window-model>.

15. There is a fourth zone, which of its nature cannot be explored as it is the unknown-unknown.

ongoing supervision conversation often has a spiral nature and it is in this context that pastoral supervision itself may be seen as revitalising, restoring and reinvigorating the client to continue in ministry cognisant of the ebb and flow of the spiritual and human dimensions of the person.

In the absence of serious psychopathology, there are, in full consciousness, intentional feelings so deep, so strong, that when deliberately reinforced they channel attention and shape a person's horizon and direct their life.¹⁶ In order that the client feel supported in this process, the task of the supervisor is to provide a safe environment such that the client has the confidence to articulate their story and its related feelings. Additionally, the supervisor needs to leave space for reflection; identify questions that might assist in deepening the client's knowledge of the event that is being related; gently challenge the client's perception of the event; provide feedback on the presented story, if that is appropriate and helpful; suggest possible paradigms, learning models and resources for continuing the interrogation of the story; and encourage new strategies for moving into the future confidently as both person and minister.

Assumptions Guiding Group Work

There are several principles and assumptions guiding group work that have been seen as beneficial in the group supervisory practice in Parramatta.¹⁷ These are as follows:

- (1) *The instilling of hope.* A pastoral practitioner enters each group session as an individual carrying a whole range of issues and concerns. Participation in a facilitated group process with peers expands the horizon of the pastoral practitioner and provides the possibility of discovering or developing new ways of dealing with problems perceived hitherto to be intractable.
- (2) *Universality.* When pastoral practitioners hear other practitioners share their stories of doubt, confusion or concern they come to realise that their experience is not unique and, over time, a growing sense of solidarity develops between group members as they support each other in the various difficult tasks they do.
- (3) *The imparting of information.* While information sharing is not the primary task of a modified Balint group process, it may occur in the context of both the group sessions and the encounters that occur before and after group sessions.
- (4) *Altruism.* While it is a reasonable assumption that Christian pastoral practitioners have, in general, a selfless attitude with regard to their pastoral practices, as group members hear each other's case studies

16. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 32.

17. See I.D. Yalom and M. Leszcz, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 10, for the points listed. The details, while grounded in experience, are supplemented with insights from Yalom.

they are gently invited to re-examine their own motivation for engaging in their pastoral work.

- (5) *Corrective recapitulation of the primary family group.* The group process 'allows for the rectification of past family and childhood events within the safety of the group, which in a way act as a substitute family for each member. New ways of relating can be formed, helping to weaken unhelpful patterns learned in one's family of origin'.¹⁸
- (6) *The development of socialising techniques.* The group process 'encourages and advances relating and social skills such as tolerance, [respecting] boundaries, empathy, and conflict resolution. This helps reduce isolation and promotes connection with others in more meaningful ways, which is generalized over time into one's life outside of the group'.¹⁹
- (7) *Imitative behaviour.* The group process helps members learn more effective ways to resolve problems and manage relationships. This can be achieved by hearing how other members apply new and appropriate methods that disrupt their, perhaps, currently dysfunctional patterns of behaviour.²⁰
- (8) *Interpersonal learning.* The group process 'provides [an] opportunity for group members to learn about relationships and intimacy, in effect helping them develop supportive, authentic interpersonal relationships. Within the safety of the group space, members can openly share and communicate; in return, they receive support and respectful feedback, perhaps for the first time ever'.²¹
- (9) *Group cohesiveness.* The group process 'gives members a sense of belonging, acceptance, and value, providing both a nurturing and empowering experience. This promotes security within oneself and in relationship to others and is an important catalyst for group members to take the risks of self-disclosure and change'.²²
- (10) *Catharsis.* The group process 'releases strong or long-suppressed emotions associated with past psychological wounding, bringing a sense of relief and allowing for significant shifts in one's internal framework'.²³
- (11) *The management of various existential factors.* The group process invites individual pastoral practitioners to reflect on their quest to find meaning in their life. This includes the process of understanding and accepting the reality of the human condition, with all its frustrations

18. I.D. Yalom, 'Rebellious Wellness Therapy', <https://www.rebelliouswellnesstherapy.com/yalomcurativefactors>.

19. See Yalom, 'Rebellious Wellness Therapy'.

20. Yalom, 'Rebellious Wellness Therapy'.

21. Yalom, 'Rebellious Wellness Therapy'.

22. Yalom, 'Rebellious Wellness Therapy'.

23. Yalom, 'Rebellious Wellness Therapy'.

and limitations. With each other's support, group members learn to accept life as given without seeking escape or denial, without fighting it, and without being paralysed by it. In the context of a faith-stance group, participants learn how to live with frustrations and limitations and, through them, to see that obstacles and difficulties are in fact the vocational path or way of Christian ministry.²⁴

Privacy and Confidentiality

As required by professional practice, the pastoral supervisors conducting the group will be in supervision themselves during the time of group contact and may want to discuss their supervisory practice with their own supervisor. If this is deemed necessary, the privacy and confidentiality of the client is respected, and their permission is sought before sharing any confidential details. Other than with the explicit permission of the supervisee, the pastoral supervisor will restrict the conversations regarding their supervision sessions with their supervisor to generalities consistent with exercising the role of supervisor in the sessions. The client is not personally identified at any stage.

The Results of the Pilot

Two sources of feedback were used for evaluation. The first source consisted of written responses to a survey conducted at the conclusion of the pilot. The second was transcribed text from a recorded Zoom feedback session following the last meeting.

The survey questions were as follows:

- (1) What prompted you to take part?
- (2) What was a high point and/or a low point for you throughout this pilot?
- (3) How was the group supervision important for you (or not)?
- (4) How likely would you be to recommend group supervision to your fellow clergy?
- (5) What do you think could be improved to make the process work better?
- (6) If the pilot group was to continue, would you join the ongoing group?

The written survey results and the text of the recorded Zoom evaluation session were coded in terms of emergent themes. Overwhelmingly responses were positive with a strong desire from many of the participants for the program to continue. The complete data set of feedback can be made available on request. Below are some of the affirmations and suggestions from the group.

Some participants said that a high point of the pilot was when each individual participant shared a story, so providing them with an opportunity to vent frustrations in what they considered to be a friendly environment and feeling quite comfortable in doing so. By being able to explore issues of importance in a setting with supportive peers and with a helpful guided process

24. Yalom, 'Rebellious Wellness Therapy', adapted.

they had been given a safe space to share their own concerns and also learn from the experience of fellow participants, which helped them to grow in pastoral ministry.

As participants arrived, they were immediately engaged with the images laid out in preparation for the session proper. These images served as a means for participants to access their story and contribute to the group discussion. For some, the picture enabled them to access frustrations that might not have surfaced otherwise, as they prompted them into deeper thinking about and experiencing of their ministry. The start and the finish of the official session in prayer and the way it was done enabled participants to enter a space where encounter could happen. For one participant the prayer 'Be Still' still rings in his mind.

Participants also commented that to be effective the supervisory groups ought to be small (the size they experienced was considered optimal) and ought to include both priests and deacons: 'One of the things that I really enjoyed tremendously is the discussions. There is a mixture of priests and deacons, like we are all clergy but there is a mixture' (participant comment). One participant felt strongly that a separate session for priests and one for deacons was not necessary; rather, working together in collaboration whilst preserving the unique character of their respective roles was a more favourable way to learn from each other. One participant said that a strong sense of collegiality came through quite quickly and also grew as the group continued to meet.

Of note are the following comments from the Diocesan Vicar for Clergy, who participated in the course: 'I would like to thank you on behalf of my formal role as the vicar for clergy to thank you very much John and Debra for undertaking this pilot program. It is a shame it is a pilot. I think I would like to keep going but anyway we will see what happens ... it is really very amazing, it is probably the sort of supervision I would prefer to have rather than one to one'.

The method employed by *Working Together Consultancy* is collaborative and innovative in design; and the skill sets required to supervise at this level are complex. By drawing on insights from the human sciences generally and in particular from psychology, spiritual direction, supervisory practise, but allowing none to dominate, the research-practitioners have oriented these insights to the values of the Gospel tradition to create a safe space for the processing of frustrations, disruptions and interruptions that occur in one's pastoral ministry. The particularity of this model using both prayer and a spaced space focus was appreciated by the clients. Both the data and the feedback from the client participants indicate that the pilot was successful, because it accomplished the aims that the researchers had hoped to achieve. The value of peer support has been long attested to, and the experience of these participants has borne this out.

Copyright of Australasian Catholic Record is the property of Australasian Catholic Record and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.