

# Catholic Tipping Point

## A Crisis of Culture: Seeking Justice to Reclaim the Church



*These are the opening remarks to welcome Marie Collins on her nation-wide tour, sponsored by Catholic Organizations for Renewal.*

Good evening and welcome to the Sugar Loaf Campus of Chestnut Hill College for this important event which gathers us. It is both wonderful and hopeful to see so many of you here this evening. My name is Cathy Nerney. I am a Sister of St Joseph, a professor here in our Religious Studies and Philosophy department and I have served as Director of our college's Institute for Forgiveness and Reconciliation since its founding in 2009. During this, the 10th anniversary year of our Institute, it feels most appropriate that we host this visit of Marie Collins to our city and church of Philadelphia this evening. The mission of our Institute for Forgiveness and Reconciliation flows from that of the Sisters of St Joseph, who live and work that all may be one. Here at CHC, we have committed ourselves as a Catholic, campus community to work to heal divisions wherever they exist at the personal, social or global level and to move out into our world to share this same commitment.

Jesus' prayer for the communion of all in God and with one another is not only the heart of the mission of the Sisters of St Joseph — that very same purpose gives the church its identity. As *Lumen Gentium* explains clearly in its opening chapter. "The church exists to be both a sign and an instrument of our communion with God and the communion/salvation — healing of the whole human race. Today our church itself in its members and as an institution is broken, sinful, in need of healing. We have much truth-telling, repentance, reparation and reclaiming to do.

We come together this evening because we love this church, which at some point in our lives awakened faith in us, and now needs our faith to help recover from its own sinfulness and failures. We must bring great love if we hope for healing energy to do the work that must be done. I'd like to close with a description of a great mentor in church reform, Karl Rahner, the German Catholic theologian many have called the greatest theologian of the 20th century. Rahner insisted that because he loved the church, which is both holy and sinful, he dared to call it to on-going reform.

I love the way Johann Baptiste Metz, a great theologian and student of Rahner, describes Rahner's love for the Church. I quote Metz: "Rahner has the church in his guts and he feels its failures like indigestion." For us, as well as for Rahner, we are here tonight because we love the church — it is somehow and for God knows what reason, inside us as much as we are inside it. The failures of the church have made us sick and God wants us, counts on us to work together to help heal this Church for the sake of all the world — with particular focus now on its most vulnerable members. As we listen with our hearts, we pray for wisdom to know what must change and for courage to commit ourselves to help bring that change about. We turn to prayer now (Judy Heffernan, Tom and Marianne Tucker) as we enter this sacred time together. Thank you for coming and welcome.

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*Members of COR (Catholic Organizations for Renewal) sponsored a nation-wide tour of Marie Collins. Born in Dublin, she is a tireless campaigner for the protection of children, for the accountability of the church, and for justice for survivors of sexual abuse. An abuse victim herself, she was appointed by Pope Francis to serve on the Commission examining clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. She consequently resigned.*

*Here is her story, told by Regina Bannan, President of SEPA/WOC (Southeast Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference)*

Marie Collins subverts the categories of victim and survivor. We want to be sure you know enough about her to understand why the Catholic Organizations for Renewal invited her on a cross-country Catholic Tipping Point tour. She spoke September 12 at the SugarLoaf Campus of Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia.

Marie's victim story makes you want to stand up and scream. As a child of twelve, she got sick and in the children's hospital was sexually abused by a priest there, and until she was seventeen. She couldn't talk about it. For the next twenty years, she felt that she was a worthless person, that her son and husband (an amazing man) would be better off without her. Then a doctor figured out what her problem was and advised her to go to the parish to report the priest in case he was still working with children. "Don't tell me his name! It must have been your fault." [Audience gasps.] She was shattered and didn't speak about it for another ten years.

Then there was public information about a terrible case and she came forward again, to the hospital and to the church. The hospital went to the police. The Archbishop said "There's never been a complaint about him," but there had been multiple complaints. A young priest psychologist supported the victims and was interested in "child protection.was destroyed.

The Archbishop became a Cardinal. Marie asked him, "Where is the morality in this?" "I have to follow my legal advice." The evidence in her case, photographs the priest had taken, was destroyed. Eventually, the priest admitted his action against her and went to jail, convicted as a "fixated pedophile" who had abused more than seventy children. He was not laicized after a canon law trial; she was not informed it was taking place.

Marie's survivor story was developing through these encounters. She describes her journey as one from naiveté to cynicism. The Cardinal explained to her the doctrine of "mental reservation," a way to lie without sinning. If there is just cause, an explanation can be ambiguous so the wrong meaning would be accepted by the person receiving it. She was appalled and began speaking out, so much so that she came to the attention of those selecting members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors in 2014.

Initially full of hope, Marie expected that the emphasis would now be on the safety of children, not protection of the church. But the Curia was determined they not succeed. The Commission had no budget, no way to keep records or receive documents, no staff support. They were treated with disrespect and lied to, even though they were working for Pope Francis. While he accepted their good recommendations, the Curia never implemented them.

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After three years of speaking out again, Marie resigned. When the Pope came to Dublin, he said to her, “You are right,” but nothing changed. She felt that perhaps the Pope himself was lied to; he had to trust somebody and he trusted the wrong people.

Marie’s story is an insider story: inside the abuse and ultimately inside the Vatican. She proposed many solutions, and acknowledged that some positive changes have been made and that most priests are not abusers. She identified the key problem as clericalism, with the self-protection that that engendered, and urged lay people to take more responsibility.

As if it had been planned as the perfect transition, two options were presented for the future at the end of the question period. Joe Boyle explained a committee he is forming for dialogue with the Archdiocese, for those wanting to act within the institution. Johanna Berrigan prepared a list of alternative communities and spiritual resources for those looking for something

else. SNAP distributed “21 things people can do to prevent abuse.”

Marie proved herself to be charming, caring, and honest. She recognized Pennsylvania’s key role in sparking the current discussion about the sex abuse scandal. Making a great idea into reality depends on the local volunteers. Kathy Schuck provided leadership to the whole group working on the Tipping Point here in Philadelphia. I am in awe of the businesslike approach she took at every step. It was a prayerful session, too, led by Judy Heffernan and Kathy, with Tucker’s music. Pat Ciarrocchi was mistress of ceremonies. Chestnut Hill College was the only Catholic venue on the national tour. We are incredibly grateful to Sister Cathy Nerney for arranging for the wonderful space of the SugarLoaf campus — and the terrific refreshments.



L to R: Sr. Cathy Nerney, Kathy Gibbons Schuck, RCWP, Linda Pinto, Marie Collins, Sara Hutchinson Ratcliffe, Catholics for Choice