

In The Crown Court at Durham

19th June 2025

R v Michael James Callaghan sentencing remarks

1. Michael James Callaghan, you are 71 years of age and have no previous convictions. Last month you stood trial at Teesside Crown Court on an indictment containing 13 counts, alleging sexual abuse by way of indecent or sexual assault against two boys. The jury found you guilty unanimously on all counts and I must now pass sentence. I have taken into account everything that I have heard and read about you, including the Pre-Sentence Report, a short medical report and the able submissions of Mr Lamb put forward on your behalf this afternoon.
2. I have also read written testimonials, including one from a parent whose three sons were educated at Ampleforth College during your time there, two of whom, it seems, were in the House for which you were responsible when you were the Housemaster. The letter speaks very highly of you and suggests the pastoral care his sons received was of the highest order. I have no doubt that you have a number of worthy character traits and in the right circumstances were more than capable of deploying your personal qualities to considerable positive effect. But there was another, very different, side to you. So different was that persona from the one you presented that it is not a surprise to hear the author of the letter describing himself as being shocked by the news of your convictions, for your behaviour was truly shocking.
3. At all times covered by the period of the indictment not only were you a Housemaster at Ampleforth College, but you were a Roman Catholic priest, a monk, in holy orders. Most, if not all, right thinking people would think it quite wrong that a person in such holy orders should have a sexual relationship with anybody else at all. Those same people would, I have no doubt, also think it very wrong for an adult to have a sexual relationship with a boy. And every one of those very same people would, I am quite sure, recoil in horror at the thought of a Roman Catholic priest having a sexual relationship with a boy. That is what you did.
4. From the evidence I heard, I have no doubt at all that you were very much attracted to ** from a very early stage of his time at Ampleforth College. It is highly likely you quickly realised he was gay, and as soon as an opportunity presented itself for you to be alone with him and get to know him you took it and

hardly let go for a second during his remaining time at the school, a period of some 4 years or so. Over time you groomed him and suborned him to your will for the purposes of your own sexual gratification. He was somewhat lonely at the school, very far from home, with not many friends, he felt he didn't really fit in and was largely unhappy. You recognised his difficulties and sought to befriend him even though he was not in your House. In his second year, it just so happened that he did have a friend who was in your House and the protocol was that if a boy wanted to visit another in a different house it was regarded as courteous that he ask the Housemaster's permission to be on the premises. Thus, when ** came to your house on such a visit he asked your permission to be there which you gave. Unhappily the boy he wished to visit was absent so within a short time ** came by again to say that he was leaving. You invited him into your room. And there you sowed the seeds of what went on to become a long period of sexual abuse of him, lasting several years during which you sexually assaulted him a minimum of 37 times. Quite probably it was many more.

5. As the Courts all too often hear in cases like these, your actions came across as benevolent, solicitous and caring. They may have been, at least in part, but you also had an ulterior motive in befriending him. Within a fairly short time when he was 14, certainly no more than 15 you began kissing him. Those incidents are represented by counts 1 and 2 on the indictment. That progressed to a bizarre, but carefully orchestrated charade in which you would pretend to have a heart attack and he would be required to perform mouth to mouth resuscitation on you. Those incidents are reflected by counts 3 and 4 on the indictment. Subsequently you became aware that ** was very attracted to another boy in the school but his attentions were rebuffed. By this time ** would have been over 16. In order to make up for his disappointment you then devised a further charade in which you would pretend to be that boy and would invite ** to simulate sexual intercourse with you whilst you both remained fully clothed. That happened at least four times in total and is represented by counts 5 and 6 on the indictment. You would also grab his buttocks and fondle them, again over his clothing, this happened at least half a dozen times and those actions are represented by counts 7 and 8 on the indictment.
6. From there matters progressed and increased in their seriousness. You made him touch your penis through your clothing at least half a dozen times. Those incidents are characterised by counts 9 and 10. Finally you required him to bite your erect penis through your clothing at least half a dozen times, those incidents are represented by counts 11 and 12 on the indictment. Of course it would have been a defence to all of the allegations once he turned 16 that he

consented. You said that he did, and he said that he did not. The jury believed him and disbelieved you.

7. Those actions that I have outlined represent an appalling catalogue of abuse against a vulnerable and helpless boy who was many miles from home and his family, and in respect of whom you were in a very considerable position of trust even though you had no direct responsibility for him. You knew that he had nowhere to turn, your apparent benevolence was such that he felt obliged to be with you and do what you wanted even though he actually hated what you did to him. Your actions were cynical and manipulative in the extreme.
8. You took him out for lunch on a Saturday most weekends. He smoked and you knew that he did but you didn't. And you told him that from then on he must promise only to smoke with you in your presence and you would provide him with his cigarettes. This was said in the pretence that you wanted him to avoid being caught smoking and to save his money, whereas your intentions were only to create opportunities to be alone with him. You even found a room where you and he could meet alone and you gave him a key for it. It seems you met him there most days.
9. Not surprisingly it did not go unnoticed in the school that you and he were spending a lot of time together but you continued undaunted. You were either very confident he would never report what you were actually doing to him or equally confident that if anything was said you would be able to talk your way out of it and pass off these meetings as nothing untoward as something involving only platonic and innocent altruism. Even when another boy made a crude drawing, using his imagination, of what he suspected you and ** were doing together, which should have brought you to your senses, you brushed it off. Brazenly, you hid in plain sight and continued unabashed.
10. During his time at the school you wormed your way into the affection of his parents and even officiated at the weddings of his two sisters. You accepted their hospitality at their home in the South of England, sometimes staying for days on end. You even said mass in their living room. During all of this time you were abusing their son. It is quite possible that the friendship was, on some level, genuine but equally I have little doubt that your actions were intended to make it far more difficult for ** to report anything that you were doing. Again, your actions were cynical. Your true purpose in being their friends was heavily disguised.

11. You made ** feel dependent on you that he wouldn't feel able to break free from you and that he would feel guilty if he tried. He told the jury he wrestled with those conflicting feelings and told the court that you did some 'very sweet things for him'. Quite simply he endured the abuse at your hands because he did not at the time, as a troubled and confused teenage boy, see any alternative course was open to him. You were nice to him in sufficient ways that he felt he needed to be nice to you in return. You constantly fed into those feelings he had and made sure they were reinforced so that he would keep coming back to you.
12. What is deeply concerning is that you seem at best, either indifferent to or at worst, oblivious to the trail of destruction that you have left in your wake. Your actions were thoroughly and completely selfish from beginning to end. And even when ** gave evidence and was clearly struggling to do so and having to relive the torment of his abuse at your hands, trying to reconcile the two sides of your personality, it should have been obvious to anyone with open eyes that he had been deeply affected by his experiences. You were asked the question during the trial "Do you accept you have caused him any emotional harm?" Somewhat surprisingly, to my mind at least, you said 'no'. As that fact was staring you in the face you were then asked another question to give you an opportunity to reflect further and you were asked whether with the benefit of hindsight knowing everything that you do now, whether you thought you had harmed him emotionally? Again, you said 'no'.
13. That only goes to demonstrate the selfishness of this offending and shows that you only ever thought of yourself and no-one else. You cannot have given any thought to the harm you were causing, if you had you would have acknowledged it. Offending of this kind causes serious and long lasting damage. It is clear ** is still trying to deal with it now over 30 years later. It is not just the obvious feelings of violation but also the feelings of betrayal and being used as a vehicle for someone else's pleasure that cause the damage and lead to the victims to question themselves and have great difficulty forming meaningful relationships and trusting other people. The long term harm is very real indeed and in this case is only too plain to see.
14. In 2013 you went on to abuse a second boy, although in that case on a single occasion. You must have been attracted to him and were unable to suppress those feelings and keep your hands to yourself. That boy was *** who was then aged 17. He trusted you implicitly. After a pre-arranged interview with you for a project he was doing as part of his studies you followed him to the door of the room and took him into a hug that he described as more of a tight squeeze. That was inappropriate and made him feel uncomfortable. You then grabbed and

groped his bottom over his clothing. He went straight back to his house where he confided in a friend who could tell from his appearance that he was very shaken up and upset by what had happened to him. He too has suffered lasting damage as a result of your actions that day and he still struggles to cope. Everything I have said in relation to the effect your actions had on ** applies to *** as well.

15. In relation to *** you denied that the event occurred as *** described but in relation to ** it should be made clear that you admitted that most of what ** alleged did in fact occur. Your defence was that in relation to things that happened when he was under 16, such as kissing your actions were not indecent; and in relation to events after he was 16 your defence was that he consented. He did not and the jury found he did not. You said to the jury that “Our relationship was unusual but it was not criminal.” Michael Callaghan, it was decidedly criminal.
16. I make it clear I do not accept the evidence you gave nor the stance you persist in adopting as referred to in the pre-sentence report that this relationship began as something ‘innocent’ and only metamorphosed into something sexual later on as a result of a mutual sexual attraction. To my mind the evidence made it very clear, as did the jury’s verdicts that, you had sexual designs on ** from a very early stage and your purpose was to manufacture opportunities to put them into practice.
17. The Sentencing Guidelines: I must have regard to the published Guideline. I recognise that Counts 1-12 are offences of indecent assault and that the guideline is in relation to the offence of Sexual Assault by Touching which only came into being on 1.5.2004. However, there is no appreciable difference between the two offences and the maximum sentence is the same.
18. Harm : It is clear that both victims have suffered severe psychological harm. I do not need any medical reports or assessments to tell me that. That indicates Category 1 harm. I recognise there are features of Category 3 harm, namely that there was never any degree of undress or nakedness but both victims can be described as being particularly vulnerable due to their personal circumstances. Those circumstances are; they were boys at a boarding school a long way from any home or family and were either under the supervision of, or authority of, you at all relevant times. Those circumstances indicate Category 2 harm. Based on the degree of psychological harm caused, which must substantially be due to the circumstances in which these offences were committed, these are therefore offences of Category 1 harm but the Category 3 harm features, and the one

Category 2 feature, means I can and should take a starting point lower than that stated in the Guideline.

19. Culpability: Category A culpability involves offences where there is a significant degree of planning or an abuse of trust. Both of those features are present. The breach of trust was in my view particularly significant.
20. Aggravating factors: In the case of ** there was specific targeting of a particularly vulnerable victim. The same could be said of *** but to a lesser extent.
21. Mitigating factors: You have no previous convictions, that is not something I ignore, it is a relevant factor, but it is not a matter to which I can attach great weight as it is clear you used your good character to help facilitate the commission of these offences. I'm not convinced there is any appreciable degree of remorse, and not one that justifies any appreciable reduction. Certainly during the trial you did not display any victim empathy. But I do take account of your age, namely 71 years, your health, and the fact you have never served a prison sentence before. All of those facts have been factored into the overall sentence which otherwise would have been greater.
22. Further it must be said that your actions have brought both the Catholic Church and the school into serious disrepute. By their nature and number these offences are so serious that they can only be met by a sentence of immediate imprisonment.
23. A Category 1A case has a starting point of 4 yrs imprisonment for a single offence, with a range of 3-7 years. A Category 2A offence has a starting point of 2 years with a range of 1-4 years. A category 3A offence has a starting point of 6 months imprisonment with a range of up to 12 months. Plainly the offences in Counts 1-12 are of escalating seriousness. I must reflect that. And that in the case of ** this offending went on for some 4 years and numerous offences were committed. I must also take account of the principle of totality. There is no credit for any plea and I do not take the view there is any personal mitigation that justifies any reduction. I have already made such allowances as I can.
24. I do not find you to be a 'dangerous offender' and the sentence will therefore be determinate and not extended.
25. The total sentence I pass upon you is one of 7 years imprisonment. That will be made up as follows:

Counts 1 and 2 : 12 months imprisonment on each concurrent

Counts 3 and 4 : 2 years imprisonment on each concurrent with each other but consecutive to the first sentence.

Counts 5 and 6 : 2 ½ years imprisonment on each concurrent and concurrent to the other sentences

Counts 7 and 8 : 12 months imprisonment on each concurrent and concurrent to the other sentences

Counts 9,10,11 and 12 : 3 years imprisonment on each concurrent with each other but consecutive to the other sentences

That makes a total of 6 years imprisonment.

On Count 13 : 12 months imprisonment consecutive. Had that offence stood alone the sentence for it would have been longer bearing in mind the harm caused.

The final total is therefore 7 years imprisonment.

26. You will be required to register as a sex offender with your local police station indefinitely. The exact terms of that obligation will be communicated to you in writing. If you breach that order at any time you will commit an offence for which you can be sent to prison.
27. You will be made the subject of a Sexual Harm Prevention Order in the terms drafted by the Prosecution and that will be served upon you in writing. It will last indefinitely. Again, if you breach it you will commit an offence for which you can be sent to prison.
28. The statutory surcharge will be drawn up, and you will be notified of it in due course.

HHJ Richard Clews

19th June 2025