

The Pope's silence on corporal punishment to children continues to fuel the inferno he ignited globally. While sycophants, apologists and spokespersons have rallied around him in his defence to brush aside the seriousness of his remarks, only he has the power to undo the damage caused. His popularity is already showing serious decline.

On February 6, this year, Pope Francis, head of the Roman Catholic Church and spiritual leader to about 1.2-billion Christians worldwide turned back the clock to a less enlightened era that triggered an international uproar among anti corporal punishment campaign groups and concerned individuals like myself.

In essence, he said it is fine for parents to smack their children as punishment for bad behaviour... but he is WRONG!

At which point, when hitting a child does it become child abuse? After several wallops on the hands, legs and buttocks with a bamboo cane, a few

Pastoral Commission for the Protection of Minors?

"It is disappointing that anyone (the Pope) with that sort of influence would make such a comment," said Peter Newell, the co-ordinator of the USA-based Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment. "Now, 44 countries worldwide have prohibited all physical punishment, including in the family, and another 45 are clearly committed to doing so," he said.

The greatest fear is that his remarks could open wide the floodgates of corporal punishment in Christian schools (especially) throughout the world. 'If the Pope said corporal punishment is okay, then it must be okay' is likely to be catch phrase and all the permission the deranged perpetrators (teachers and ignorant parents) need to execute heinous cruelty upon children.

I can understand his wanting to endear himself more to the audience by miming the action of slapping a child on the bottom for greater effect, but his failing to add 'I'm only joking' (if he were) will have serious implications for



Pope Francis

PHOTO: AFP

well-aimed slaps on the face with a hand, or after the child becomes comatose? Or maybe after the child has been scarred for life after a demented schoolteacher has taken a red-hot cooking spatula to the child's leg calf, as one did at Talimul Quran Mahila Madrasa in Kadamtali where 14 young mercilessly suffered. Perhaps after their unheeded cries for help and they've committed suicide? Corporal punishment is child abuse however light – there are no degrees of wrongness in this.

Recalling a conversation the Pope had with a father who told him that on occasions he hits his children if they have been naughty, His Holiness, smiling and miming the action of slapping a child on the bottom, said: "One time, I heard a father say, 'At times I have to hit my children a bit, but never in the face so as not to humiliate them.'"

"That's great. He had a sense of dignity. He should punish, do the right thing, and then move on."

Campaign groups worldwide for child protection were horrified and outraged by the off-the-cuff comments and fear they could be misinterpreted as an endorsement of corporal punishment on children.

And taking into consideration his silence on the subject since, that's exactly how it looks. It should also be noted that the Holy See is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and corporal punishment is in direct contravention of the Act.

Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland, asks: Is the Holy See now doing what it claimed not to be doing a year ago, namely actively and internationally promoting the corporal punishment of children? If it is, then Pope Francis has surely turned the clock back considerably. What faith are we to have now in the Holy See's commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child? Will we hear anything on this subject from the Holy See's new

children worldwide, especially within the Catholic church school system, where corporal punishment problems are deep-rooted and profuse.

Dr Laura Markham, a psychologist and parenting expert, said that corporal punishment is connected to higher rates of aggression, delinquency and mental health problems.

The late American President and staunch Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy once said: "an error only becomes a mistake if it is not corrected".

There's still time for His Holiness Pope Francis to correct his error, the Holy See not to be seen to renege on its international obligations and commitments, and for both to benefit children worldwide irrespective of race, creed, and nationality.

Irrespective of what the Pope said, the facts remain unchanged. Corporal punishment is totally wrong and has no place in modern society. There is no evidence whatsoever to support that beating a child with a stick, clenched fist, leather belt, bamboo cane or some other instrument; or how by kicking, punching, pinching, pulling their ears and hair or branding them with a red-hot spatula is good for the child and help make them better citizens.

Eminent Bangladeshi Supreme Court Justices, Md Imman Ali and Md. Sheikh Hassan Arif describes corporal punishment as: "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and a clear violation of a child's fundamental right to life, liberty and freedom".

English poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744) wrote, "To err is human; to forgive, divine". No doubt everyone will forgive His Holiness when his error is corrected, but there is a use-by date to this and justice delayed is justice denied.

*The writer is a former newspaper and magazine publisher and editor, an award-winning writer, humanitarian, and a human rights activist who campaigned vigorously for five years to abolish corporal punishment in Bangladesh.*

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