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Lifestyle

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Two of us: Chrissie and Anthony Foster

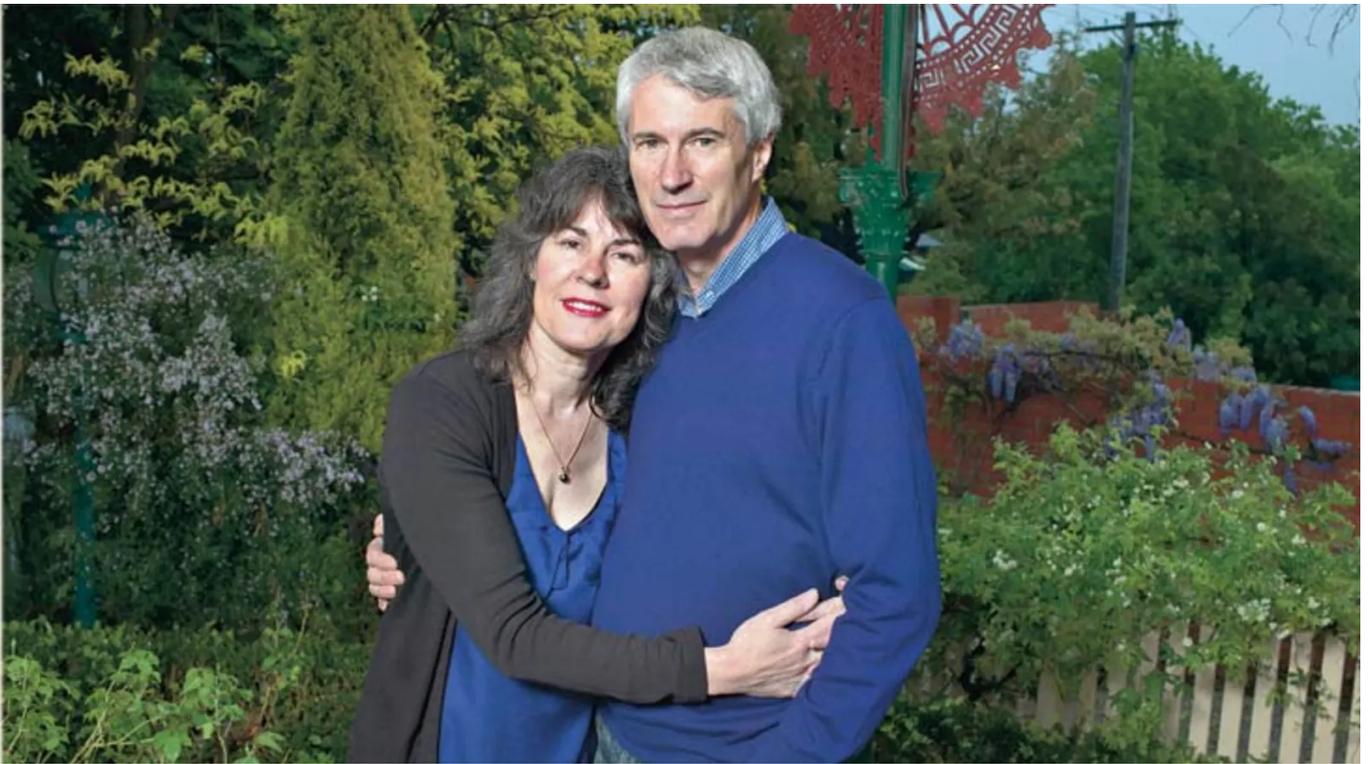
Chrissie, 55, and Anthony Foster, 57, are still trying to piece together their fractured lives after discovering two of their three daughters were sexually abused by their parish priest. Despite the heartbreak and trauma they've experienced since, their relationship remains as strong as ever.

By **Interviews by Carla Grossetti**

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Chrissie: I was 24 when I first met Anthony. He answered the door at a friend's house. I could see straight away he liked me. He invited me in but my friend wasn't home, so I said I'd come back later. Several months after that, I was at a leap-year party and we started talking... about what we hoped to get out of life. Six weeks later, he proposed and there was no hesitation; we were so in love. We have stuck by each other ever since, no matter what. Anthony and I were married in July, 1980. Our daughter Emma came along in November, 1981, and Katie was born in July, 1983.

It was [in March, 1995], 10 years after our youngest daughter Aimee was born, that a local newspaper reported that our parish priest, [Kevin] O'Donnell, had been charged with child sex crimes. O'Donnell had lived in the presbytery attached to the girls' school but, because the article only mentioned him targeting boys, I remember thinking, "Thank goodness our girls weren't involved."



Fractured lives ... Chrissie and Anthony Foster.

Anthony and I did ask Emma if O'Donnell had ever touched her. When we did, she said, "NO!" and stormed out of the room. From then on, our lives started to unravel. By September that year Emma was in a psych unit with anorexia and had begun her descent into drug use and self-harm, and Katie, too, had begun to implode.

Although the Catholic Church knew about O'Donnell's history of abusing children, it was another two years before we found out Katie had been molested, too. I found a suicide note Katie wrote that said he had plucked her and Emma out of class many times and sexually abused them.

Nothing could have prepared Anthony and me for that horrendous truth. We were devastated. The only thing we could do - apart from caring for our children - was to make the church accountable and channel all that explosive anger and emotion. They knew about him. How could they let this happen? We just banded together and thought: "You don't do this to our children and walk away." We didn't argue with each other; all our energies went into taking action against the church. It was a long fight [10 years] but we won: in March, 2006, the church awarded the girls compensation.

Initially, I felt a lot of guilt because I was the Catholic one and Anthony is an atheist. I thought, "If I hadn't sent them to a Catholic school, this wouldn't have happened." Anthony gets upset if I say, "It's my fault." He says: "I love you. This happened and we are in it together." It's humbling. If it was the other way round, I don't know if I'd have the same reaction. He says: "I don't want to lose you because that would be the end of everything."

What has happened in our lives, the awful pain we have been through, is heartbreaking. In 1999, Katie, who, by then, had a drinking problem, was hit at 70km/h by a drunk driver and left brain-damaged; in 2008, Emma committed suicide. We do have bad times: I cry and sometimes I feel like crap and depressed and he is the only other person who understands. He is Emma's father and I'm her mother. I can tell Anthony whatever I like.

I don't go to church any more; I refuse to bow down before men who claim to represent God. The Catholic Church has taken two of our daughters from us, but they can never take away our love for each other and for our children. The church doesn't possess love. It claims it does... but it has no idea.

Anthony: Chrissie and I have been soul mates since the day we met in Melbourne [February 29, 1980]. We've been together 30 years now and had almost 16 years together before Emma disclosed O'Donnell's crimes. There is a family photo in our front room taken not long before he was convicted and I recall looking at it thinking, "This is just perfect. What could go wrong?" But what could go wrong had already gone wrong: he had repeatedly raped our two daughters.

Everything that has happened to Chrissie and me has always been underpinned by our amazing relationship. But there's never been a lot of time to just stand back and look at what has happened to us. At no point have we ever fallen into a heap. How could we? As well as running our own [central heating] business and trying to provide for the family, we had to try to keep everything on an even keel with two deeply disturbed daughters. We've spent so many years putting out fires - first with Emma's self-harm, drug use and overdoses and all that distress, and now with the continuing, daily horror of dealing with Katie's disabilities. Even Aimee has suffered from depression and panic attacks.

I don't know why none of the stresses we've experienced have affected our relationship, but I can say I have never doubted our bond. Chrissie is a natural person. There is no front. She is open, honest and warm, and is still the person I prefer to spend my time with. Our family has been destroyed, but our relationship is rock solid.

When we became aware of O'Donnell's crimes against our daughters, Chrissie and I automatically became a common force trying to deal with the might of the Catholic Church. The church should be ashamed. If it had been open about the abuse, Emma might have still been here today.

Our daughter Aimee is our shining light, but when we see her moving forward in life we think, 'There should be two more.'

Looking back, we shouldn't feel any guilt about what happened because it's the church's fault, but we wish we'd done things differently: we wish the girls went to a state school, but there is no apportioning of blame. The abuse could have happened somewhere else. I admire Chrissie tremendously: to go from being an indoctrinated Catholic to challenging the organisation she had put her faith in and writing her book [Hell on the Way to Heaven] is not something I would have done. Writing the book did bring Chrissie some peace which, in turn, made it a positive thing for both of us. I'm so proud of her for giving a voice to other victims and encouraging others to come forward with their stories, but the fact is we will never again find real peace.

I am retired now and, although Chrissie and I do have lots of time together, we still have a lot of anger. Our daughter Aimee is our shining light, but when we see her moving forward in life we think, "There should be two more." It's a cruel twist of fate that Katie still remembers the abuse, but not something that happened three minutes ago, which means we are all stuck in this dark past. Our focus now is on trying to make the most of each day and to not get too down. We don't want to lose any more of our lives.

Good Weekend