

## **The ripples of suffering and the Ballarat Royal Commission hearing**

In the last few weeks I have been delivering talks and meeting with many different people in parishes and other settings up and down the east coast.

Everywhere I go the horror of sexual abuse of children leaves people dumbfounded that such a scandal not only occurred but that otherwise good people often did little to prevent it occurring.

At these occasions people often come up to chat after the presentation. They want to talk privately about their experiences or let me know that they are struggling to be heard by 'the powers that be'. Many times it relates to the slowness of the Church's response or to the sense that Church officials still don't get the full impact of this scandal.

When I started working in this area experienced people told me the impact of sexual abuse is far reaching. They were referring to the vicarious trauma felt beyond the victim by their families, friends and support people. Often those caring for victims and walking with them in their journey to survive are likewise victims of the abuse. The ripples in the pond go very wide.

It is this devastation that haunts the lives of so many people. It has its own pathology. Often support people suffer in silence and go without recognition. Too few are acknowledged for the vital role they have played in bringing a degree of health and equilibrium to the lives of those who were directly abused. I hope the Royal Commission does not forget them when it comes time to make recommendations on who can access redress systems.

At these same events I have encountered other victims of this scandal who also suffer in silence. Partly they remain quiet out of fear of being disrespectful to those who were abused. These are the families of people who have been wrongly accused or who were the subject of mistaken identity. I, too, feel hesitant in raising this because some people may think that I am trying to shift the attention away from the victims of abuse. But I am not. I simply want to acknowledge the toxic impacts the abuse scandal has wrought on our community.

Some reputations have been wrongly damaged and some families devastated when accusations have been falsely or mistakenly made. This brings its own misery and suffering and in the interests of getting all the truth out this too needs to be heard.

# Blog

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On a related matter I recently read a draft paper on the devastation abuse brings to a person's sense of spirituality, particularly within a religious context. Having an appreciation of how an individual's sense of God, truth and beauty can be utterly shattered when religious personnel have perpetrated abuse on an unsuspecting child is yet again a shameful legacy that too many people suffer.

If we are to take seriously a resolve to heal individuals and the community of the wounds of abuse, we need to address all those who are hurt and all the circumstances they are in.

The Royal Commission this week released its official announcement about the Ballarat hearing which will start on Tuesday 19 May and is expected to last up to three weeks. The community of Ballarat will hear from survivors, from at least one perpetrator and from others in the community.

This will be a sorry and sad time for so many people in Ballarat, for survivors, for their families, friends and supporters, for Catholics and for the broader community.

During this time and beyond we all need to do what we can to support each other, to support survivors and their supporters, to support our school communities and teachers, sisters and brothers, clergy and parishioners.

I expect many people will need or be looking for help in many different ways as the hearing unfolds. On both our website and the Commission's website are lists and contact details for the many services that can help.

Francis Sullivan, CEO, TJHC  
[www.tjhcouncil.org.au](http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au)  
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