

The damage of child abuse and the pathology of child sex abusers

This week in the Royal Commission's Ballarat hearing, psychiatrist Carolyn Quadrio gave evidence about the impact of child sex abuse on survivors and also the pathology of child sex abusers.

Professor Quadrio, an Associate Professor at the University of New South Wales and a consultant family psychiatrist, is one of just a few expert witnesses that have given evidence in hearings involving the Church. What she told the Commission was considered, forthright and informative.

She has worked with abusers and the abused for over 30 years. She told the Commission that abuse survivors are prone to various mental health problems, and that the tendency to keep the abuse a secret worsens the psychological damage.

She said childhood abuse affects every aspect of a person's development.

"Children will be affected in terms of their capacity to form relationships, their ability to function at school, their ability to progress in education and their ability to progress in employment. They're often anxious, depressed, they often turn to alcohol or drugs as a way of kind of medicating their distress and so then substance abuse becomes a problem.

Professor Quadrio told the Commission children usually don't make disclosures at the time of the abuse. She said when they do make disclosures they're often not believed. "And not being believed itself is an extremely damaging experience so that kind of compounds the trauma that they've already been subjected to," she said.

She told the Commission that when a member of the clergy sexually abuses a child it can be even more damaging because young children see a priest or a member of the clergy as someone who's close to God, "so the sense of betrayal is particularly shattering because it's kind of like not just one bad person but it's... it feels like well maybe God's bad.

She also said the negative response from the family and community can compound the damage enormously.

She told the Commission about 25 per cent of girls and 5 to 15 per cent of boys suffer some sort of abuse in the general community while for children living in institutions about 30 per cent of girls and 20 per cent of boys are abused.

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She said while international studies have shown the sexual abuse of children has been higher in Catholic institutions she did not think celibacy drives child abuse, rather that men who have a sexual orientation to children might feel comfortable in the priesthood.

“You know the celibacy vow is not going to bother you if you're not interested in having sex with, you know, with other adults. So they have access, they have authority and they have the cover of a very respected profession.”

Professor Quadrio's evidence has provided an enormous amount of information to the Commission. In the course of her evidence she touched on many issues that the Church and particularly the Truth Justice and Healing Council will need to explore in greater depth as we move to a more solid understanding of the impact of child sex abuse and the pathology of sex abusers in the Church.

Francis Sullivan, CEO, TJHC

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