

Can credibility ever be rebuilt?

Late last week the St Mary's Cathedral Parish in Hobart put on an information evening attended by about 50 people. It was one of the many talks I do around Australia – simply to talk to ordinary Catholics about what the Council is doing, why we're doing it, what we can expect from the whole Royal Commission process.

It doesn't matter if five people or 200 attend – you can hear a pin drop. People are intensely interested. They feel it deeply. The questions I'm asked are deep and insightful. Some people are angry, others are confused, others are really disappointed. Others are still wondering how this could have happened in the Catholic Church.

And while no one in these rooms have their fingerprints on the past, all seem to be prepared to accept part of the collective shame associated with child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Just as importantly there seems to be a strong willingness to take some responsibility for ensuring the future is better, that all the issues are dealt with openly and honestly and that action is taken.

One of the questions I am always asked at these Parish meetings is 'what can we do?' My response is always two fold.

First, keep talking about the issues, to each other, to your local priest, to your Bishop. Demand that they are engaged and that as a congregation you are part of the discussion. Insist that you know what is happening locally and what the Church is doing nationally.

Second, keep your hearts open to survivors, let them know they are welcome in the church if that is what they want, reach out, be inclusive both within the parish and outside.

The credibility of the Catholic Church around Australia is low. I hear it everywhere. Attendance has fallen dramatically. The relevance of the Catholic Church in every-day life is questioned.

When you have something as serious as childhood sex abuse, perpetrated by vowed religious and clerics, the hypocrisy cuts deep and it largely drowns out anything said about other issues across the many parts of our communities in which the Church is doing great work: education, health, welfare, social justice.

If we are ever to be heard when we speak about refugees, about the living wage, about the poor and the disadvantaged then we need to have fully disclosed and put in place reforms that deliver justice and compassion for child sexual abuse survivors.

This is what the TJHC is working to achieve.

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