

## CRA National Assembly, Police Reporting

### Police Integrity Commission report into 'blind reporting'

Late last week the NSW Police Integrity Commission (PIC) released its report into the involvement of NSW Police with the Catholic Church's Professional Standards Resource Group (PSRG) and Professional Standards Office (PSO) in NSW and what is known as 'blind reporting' of historic child sexual abuse allegations.

The investigation followed three stories on Lateline in mid-2013 in which it was claimed the Church in NSW 'had tried to strike a secret agreement with the NSW Police to allow it to withhold information about paedophile priests'.

Blind reporting is a practise unique to NSW of reporting an allegation of sexual abuse to the police without identifying the victim. All other information, including the name of the perpetrator, is provided.

A blind report is only made when the adult survivor who has come to the Church has specifically said they do not want the report taken to the police.

Although under the Church's *Towards Healing and Melbourne Response* adult survivors are encouraged to make a report to the police, it is a fact that for various reasons, survivors often do not want the police involved. That said, there is a clear difference between complying with the wishes of survivors, and entering into some illegal arrangement permitting the withholding of information from the police in general.

The Lateline stories were detailed and confronting and I did a long interview with Tony Jones at the time in which I said the claims needed to be investigated and we would fully cooperate.

Following the stories the TJHC started collecting information, including an FOI search within all state Police Forces and other agencies, to see if we could find anything that indicated a formal agreement had been made to hide information, in NSW or elsewhere. Nothing came to light. All the information we collected was provided to the Royal Commission.

Almost two years to the day since the first Lateline story, the 260 page PIC report found there was no formal agreement to withhold information: in fact it noted that NSW PSO would always cooperate when police requested information. It also found the Catholic Church had not received any unique preferential treatment and that blind reports of sexual assaults from other Churches were also accepted by the Police.

The PIC has expressed the view however that blind reporting is in breach of the NSW Crimes Act and blind reports should not have been accepted by the NSW police.

The PIC findings mean that there is an issue now for any organisation in NSW, church or otherwise, as to what it should do when it becomes aware of an allegation of sexual abuse but the adult survivor making the claim does not want the police involved.

On the face of the PIC report it seems that in NSW, regardless of the wishes of the abuse victim, the identity of the survivor must be reported immediately, along with the details of the abuse and the identity of the perpetrator, which has always been reported.

Let's just hope it doesn't stop victims coming forward.

### **CRA National Assembly**

This week I was lucky to arrive a bit early to address the National Assembly of Catholic Religious Australia in Brisbane.

It was interesting to hear US Josephite sister, Dr Carol Zinn speak about the challenges facing religious life and religious leaders, one of which was to remain close to people on the margins, people who struggle and people who have been disadvantaged in the Church. I know this resonated with leaders in the room on Wednesday as our later discussion turned to issues of healing and pastoral support for victims of child sex abuse. Everyone was acutely aware that the Church's resources and experience in pastoral and spiritual healing need to be brought to bear on this issue.

This dovetailed into the presentation by Sr Annette Cunliffe, co-Executive Officer at the National Committee for Professional Standards.

Sr Annette talked about the impact of the Royal Commission on the work of the NCPS. In relation to the Council's consultations on a new overarching national child protection body in the Catholic Church, she called for a working party to develop the standards that would be monitored by the new body currently under consideration. She said there was more awareness and professionalism in the Church than there was three years ago and she encouraged congregations to maintain their focus on the wellbeing of children. She encouraged each congregation to establish a dedicated role that deals with issues around the protection of children and vulnerable people.

The Council is looking forward to handing over its recommendations later this year for action by the Church leadership. At the end of the day we can consult and provide advice but it's up to the bishops and religious leaders to take this forward. I'm not sure yet what the new entity will look like or how it will be rolled out, but one thing is clear, the status quo is not an option.

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