

30 years of child sexual abuse reporting from the National Catholic Reporter

In the editorial that is part of this week's series of stories in the National Catholic Reporter (NCR) on child sexual abuse readers are painted a thumb nail picture of how it was dealt with for many years by Church leaders in the USA.

This is how the NCR said it went: If a serious crime of sexual abuse is committed, firstly conceal it; if an accuser comes forward, deny and condemn them; if they persist, offer to pay for their silence; if that fails, hire the best lawyers available; as a last resort try to settle and apologize to anyone who may have been hurt.

The editorial describes this scenario as "unthinkable", but "descriptive of the very behavior that Catholics have witnessed among their leaders, with slight variations, for the past 30 years."

The stories in the NCR this week, which we link to in this edition of our newsletter, are from reporters, advocates and commentators who have covered the abuse in the US Church for years, who have quite reasonably posed the question "what did leaders know and when did they know it?"

There is a piece from a priest who argues that survivors of clerical sexual abuse have forced a rewrite of the Church's history and forced a change in the way it operates and a story from a survivor-advocate about the struggle to be heard.

For more than 30 years the National Catholic Reporter in the US has been reporting on child sexual abuse both within the US church and more broadly across the Catholic Church world-wide.

The author says "this highly toxic dimension of the institutional church and its clerical subculture has been exposed in country after country on every continent".

Over the decades progress has been made, particularly with reforms and accountability introduced recently by Pope Francis and some of the earlier protocols developed here which opened up a pathway for survivors to connect with the Church and seek justice.

Not everything has worked, many survivors still feel the same disconnect and antagonism which is part of the history of child sexual abuse here, in the US and many other countries.

In Australia the Church has a unique opportunity. The Royal Commission is driving change. Not just in the Catholic Church but across the community.

We should embrace this opportunity to establish the Church as a credible organisation willing to acknowledge failings, accept criticism, and put in place reforms and move forward.

Of course this is a challenging process and one that requires a determination and resolve born of a commitment to justice and those who have been abused. Our history demands nothing less for us.

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