

Bishop Robinson before the Commission and the report into abuse in the Scottish Church

RC redress recommendations go to Government next week

Next week the Royal Commission will send its recommendations on redress and civil litigation reforms to the Governor-General. We would expect it to be released publically very shortly after.

Its recommendations and the response from governments, state and federal, will clearly signal what, and the extent to which, survivors can expect our law makers to respond to the years of suffering and injustice they have endured.

Next week, as one by one, we see what our governments say about redress we will be able to truly gauge their commitment and willingness to stand up for abuse survivors.

As I've said before, redress for survivors is at the very centre of this Commission's work – unless governments respond positively to its recommendations then, tragically, survivors could well be left fighting their own fight against too many well resources and unsympathetic institutions who will again be let off the hook.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson and Commission hearing

This week retired Bishop Geoffrey Robinson was the sole witness in a one-day Royal Commission hearing which looked at his involvement across some five decades of dealing with child sexual abuse within the Church.

Bishop Robinson, who was a bishop for 31 years in the Sydney Archdiocese and a priest for 54 years, has spoken out and written widely urging "profound and enduring change" and a more compassionate approach by the Church to victims of abuse.

His views and position within the Church are not universally accepted and he has often been in conflict with his fellow bishops.

At the hearing he gave evidence about the development of *Towards Healing*, his membership of the College of Consultors of the Archdiocese of Sydney, the operation of Encompass Australasia, his involvement with senior Vatican officials and many other issues.

His evidence will be used in a public hearing in early 2017 into the broader response of the Catholic Church to child sexual abuse by clergy and religious.

Bishop Robinson made a point of highlighting the hard work of many people over the years as the Church moved towards a more compassionate approach to survivors of child sexual abuse.

Interestingly much of his evidence, as could be said for many church leaders who have come before the Commission, is reflected in a report released this week into child abuse and the Catholic Church in Scotland.

The Scottish Commission releases report into CSA in Scottish Catholic Church

The Scottish Commission, led by Dr Andrew McLellan CBE, former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and former Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, described the abuse crisis as “the greatest challenge facing the whole Catholic Church in Scotland”.

In the report we have again seen the Church criticised for its lack of consistency and transparency in handling historic allegations of abuse. The report concluded that support for survivors must be the Church’s absolute priority, and said that it had not been so in the past.

It condemned a culture of secrecy and cover-up that allowed abuse to remain hidden. It also made the point that by seeking to avoid scandal, the Church had caused “scandal in a theological sense” to victims and to the wider Catholic population.

It acknowledged the hard work of many within the Church to improve safeguarding, but noted that the Church in Scotland “has not made significant structural changes” in terms of embedding safeguarding in ministry and theology.

It also called for the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland to be given clear authority to lay down policies and procedures around abuse “which must be followed to the letter in every diocese.”

It also called for external scrutiny and independence and continuous professional development.

Throughout the world investigations into the way the Catholic Church handled child sexual abuse continue, with many of the final reports making similar findings and recommendations – put victims first, greater accountability, fair and compassionate redress.

While the Royal Commission here in Australia continues to be a gruelling and challenging process for all involved – survivors in particular – it is encouraging to see Australian Church leaders continuing to push for change.

The process, recommended by the TJHC, to establish a new child protection oversight body within the Church is progressing, changes to the way church authorities approach the courts in child sex abuse claims are in place, and a radical new approach to determining redress for survivors has been fully endorsed by Church leaders.

This is all progress which has been pushed through by the leaders of both the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia.

And while this is good news we still have a long way to go.

Francis Sullivan, CEO, TJHC

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