

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW

ABC Sunday Nights

John Cleary

The Issue: Cardinal Pell, Rome advice to bishops about reporting sex abuse, Archbishop Philip Wilson



Francis Sullivan, CEO, TJHC

14 February 2016

John Cleary:

First tonight, news this week that Cardinal George Pell is not to return to Australia to give evidence before the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse was followed a couple of days later with news from Rome that the Church is telling newly appointed bishops that it's not necessarily their duty to report accusations of clerical child abuse and that only victims and their families should make the decision to report that abuse: "according to the state of civil laws of each country where reporting is obligatory, it is not necessarily the duty of bishops to report suspects to authorities the police or state prosecutors in the moment when they are made aware of crimes or sinful deeds", the document states. It's raised quite a few questions, and a few moments ago I spoke with Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Catholic Church's Truth Justice and Healing Council.

Francis Sullivan what's your response to the news that Cardinal George Pell will not be returning to Australia to answer questions regarding his time at Ballarat, before the Royal Commission?

Francis Sullivan:

Oh initially like everybody else I was disappointed. It's obviously a lot better when people turn up in person, particularly when there are very important questions that need to be answered. But again, once you realise that an individual has had medical advice, and that medical advice has been so binding that he can't travel, the most important thing now is that his evidence is given, in whichever way it can be to the Commission because they need to make findings in this case study and move to the next one.

JC: There are many in the public and the media who look quite sceptically at the medical advice, and I'm not asking you to comment on that, but it is surely a surprise that if George Pell is well enough to fly to Rome that we now have a situation where he's been told medical advice is he can't come back to Australia yet there are many medicos who say they'd quite willingly fly to Rome and bring him back on a plane if necessary. And they're not joking.

FS: Oh look, at the end of the day people's medical conditions obviously deteriorate. I don't know the details, as you say.

I think, really, there are two parts about this. Cardinal Pell is a lightning rod for criticism and discontent even with regard to decisions like this. He has for a long time, we know been a controversial and divisive figure in the public domain because he holds very strong views and he has never been shy about expressing those views. So he's going to have detractors.

What's important as far as the Royal Commission is concerned though, is that his evidence is heard. Now one thing you would have to say, he's always made himself available to give evidence, he has expressed every time his regret about not being there in person, and we've really just got to get to the reality of this now and say let's have the evidence as soon as possible.

Justice McClellan really does need to wind up this case study. There are very important things that have been mentioned in it. Already we've had very profound evidence from Archbishop Heart, Bishop Connors, Bishop Finnigan. So I think it's in everyone's interest to get the evidence and get this done.

JC: Cardinal George Pell has been seen for many years by many people as Australia's leading Catholic Church representative in the country, indeed that's the position he occupied. In this instance we're seeing Cardinal George Pell in not coming back to Australia as being representative of a church in the same way that Bernard Law in Boston, and dare one even say Marcial Maciel of the Legionaries of Christ who now find themselves virtual prisoners of the Vatican over their fear of repercussions in their native countries if they were to return to those countries (though it's not the case with Maciel anymore) but certainly with Bernard Law as we've seen in the recent movie, *Spotlight*. This is something of concern not just for George Pell, but for the Church in Australia.

FS: Well John the optics aren't great. I mean you'd be a mug to say otherwise. Unfortunately the Boston situation and Cardinal Law obviously was different from what we are facing here. There have not only been allegations in the Boston situation, but they were found to be correct. We don't have that situation here.

Secondly Cardinal Pell fronted the Royal Commission already, gave evidence a second time and will give evidence a third time. Again there are still no allegations proven, or have there been findings of a criminal nature. So we're talking about different things when we're talking about Boston vs Australia at the moment.

But I do concede that the optics for the Catholic Church are never good. The conspiracy that the Church works in secrecy all the time is very potent and that when senior officials somehow look like they're not fully cooperating, it becomes a really strong narrative. All I can say is that it's in everyone's interest that we hear the evidence of Cardinal Pell so that findings can be made and the case study can be drawn to a close.

As far as the Catholic Church in Australia is concerned, we have tried to cooperate as fully as is practicably possible on many, many levels for the Royal Commission.

We are the single largest institution that's had as many public hearings about us. We are providing all our data. I don't think any other institution is providing all its data to the Royal Commission. We have had over a third of the private sessions related to the Catholic Church. We have cooperated in every possible way.

I think the problem and the public optic problem is that the loss of trust by the Catholic Church in the community is seared in the frontal lobes of most people's minds. It'll take more than a Royal Commission for us to get through this. It will probably take another generation because when you have an institution like the Church breaking its most fundamental of trusts – that is, the care of the most vulnerable – people just say the hypocrisy is too hard to swallow.

And then when you have high profile individuals who have been the subject of criticism because of their, maybe their social positions, or whatever, and when they are involved in the hearings, it can become a real cocktail for discontent. And for us who are trying to navigate with the Church a way forward, these are real challenges and they're not easy.

JC: You indicated a moment ago that in some ways the church is seen by members of the public as operating as an institution separate from, and or above the law, separate from civil society. This view could only not but be reinforced by observations during the week that that of course being done by bishops in Rome implied that they do not necessarily have to report issues of child sexual abuse – that this is a matter for them to report to the church, not to the civil authorities.

FS: Sure, it's breathtakingly arrogant. I mean at the end of the day a bishop and a religious leader first and foremost has a moral responsibility to do the right thing. It should never be limited to what are the legal frameworks of a country. Rather, it should always be about what is for the common good, what is for the safety of children, and the community. Sure in some countries, even in our own, we have varying laws around reporting to police about abuse. We think there should be a national law that's consistent everywhere. And in some countries there are no laws at all. But when you are actually advising bishops about the way to be a bishop, first and foremost you need to be guided by moral responsibility, not just legal.

And the type of arrogance that some have in this regard, is just another nail in the coffin for the credibility of the church.

JC: Would you be comfortable if laws were consistent in Australia and did require bishops to report immediately that they heard?

FS: Of course, because that is actually now the policy of the Catholic Church: that regardless of the law, that bishops and religious leaders need to tell authorities and the police what they know, when they hear it. Now if an adult comes to them and says this happened to me as a child and I don't want it reported to the police, then the bishops and religious leaders need to report to the police and leave the adult's name out of it, because it's the adult's common law right. But the Church needs to go forward with the information it has and hopefully the law in Australia will be consistent around that for all institutions.

JC: Francis Sullivan, thanks so much for joining us on Sunday Night.

FS: Thanks a lot John.

JC: Francis Sullivan the CEO of the Catholic Church's Truth Justice and Healing Council. And there's more to come on that front as also last week Adelaide Catholic Archbishop Phillip Wilson has failed in his bid to stop proceedings on a charge of concealing child sex abuse dating back to his time in the Diocese of Newcastle. Archbishop Wilson is said to be the most senior Catholic cleric in the world to face such charges. So it still continues.

ENDS

[Listen to the interview](#)

Media contact: Michael Salmon 0417 495 018

The Truth Justice and Healing Council is coordinating the Catholic Church's engagement with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Follow us on [Twitter](#)

Follow us on [Facebook](#)

For more information on the Truth Justice and Healing Council go to: www.tjhcouncil.org.au

For more information on the Royal Commission go to: <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>

Truth Justice and Healing Council

PO Box 4593 KINGSTON ACT 2604 | Tel: +61 2 6234 0900 | Fax: +61 2 6234 0999