

Ballarat hearing, Cardinal Pell evidence

Francis Sullivan, 23 February 2016

It's been quite a week.

Victoria's Ballarat Bishop Paul Bird put himself forward as a defendant in historical sex abuse cases. Bishop Bird, along with a number of other senior Church leaders including Archbishop Fisher in Sydney and Archbishop Coleridge in Brisbane, have now publically endorsed the new policy which requires a Church organisation facing a civil claim of child sexual abuse to help identify an entity to sue.

This is solid support for the measure signed off by Church leaders last year. While the leaders are not required by law to provide the entity to sue, it takes strong moral leaders to show the way. Victims groups have welcomed the decision as a shining light.

And the Royal Commission is in Ballarat this week to hear the third part of Case Study 28. This time it's looking at allegations of child sex abuse by clergy and religious focusing on the Christian Brothers. Bishop Ronald Mulkearns, who is terminally ill will also give evidence via video.

Next week, Cardinal George Pell will provide evidence for Case Studies 28 and 35, via video from Rome, on his doctor's advice.

Not surprisingly, the Cardinal's inability to attend in person has unleashed a visceral response from many in the community.

Survivors and their supporters are understandably angry that they will not get their day in court with the Cardinal.

Many have described the anguish they felt having to give evidence in front of the Commissioners and before a public gallery. They expected the Cardinal to answer questions under similar circumstances.

For many, the Cardinal's evidence is very significant, not just because of his role in the Diocese of Ballarat and the Archdiocese of Melbourne, but in his current capacity as the most senior Catholic in Australia and the third ranking Vatican official in the world.

A crowd funding effort has raised over \$200,000 to enable 15 or more survivors to travel to Rome to attend the Cardinal's evidence in person. This is a great measure of solidarity from the Australian community.

And proceeds from comedian, Tim Minchin's controversial song, which called on the Cardinal to return home to give evidence, also contributed to that fund.

The airwaves have been alive with all of this. There have been all sorts of requests and suggestions, accusations and generalisations. It's depressing. The Church has clearly lost any lingering credibility with many people in the community.

But what matters at the end of the day is that we get the evidence from the Cardinal, and we get it in an effective way, in a dignified way that befits a royal commission so that the Commissioners can draw this case study to a close. The Cardinal must be afforded procedural fairness, like anybody else.

Some people, particularly some of the victims, gave their evidence way back in the middle of last year. The lack of closure of this hearing is just adding to the distress.

The Royal Commission is doing a professional job under extraordinary, tense and difficult circumstances. In the face of this heightened atmosphere, and massive public interest, the Royal Commission has the where-with-all to go about its work in a dispassionate and objective way.

And more broadly this week, people are still talking about the film *Spotlight*. It's absolutely extraordinary.

It tells you that the way the Catholic Church dealt with child sex abuse is germane to its culture. It's a culture where the residue of a medieval structures still exists, where power and control determine who says what, and when. Who gets the information and how individuals can be intimidated in the system not to speak up. It's that culture that in its claustrophobic nature shuts things down and becomes extraordinarily protective of the institution. That's what *Spotlight* showed.

And so, the work of the Council continues. We've got a long way to go yet.

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