

Change is taking place

This week the Royal Commission finalised hearing evidence into its public hearing about the way in which the Archdiocese of Melbourne responded to allegations of child sexual abuse while earlier this month the Commission also finalised hearing evidence into the Ballarat case study.

Together these two hearings have run over more than 12 months and have attracted a huge amount of media coverage and commentary from all parts of the community.

The behavior of many priests and religious in Ballarat and in Doveton in Melbourne was truly appalling and the two case studies have highlighted how poorly church leaders responded the victims.

It now looks like there may only be one or two more public hearings involving the Catholic Church before the Commission's final public hearing early next year which will again focus on 'why' so much child sexual abuse took place in Catholic Church institutions.

With the end of these last two hearings, as protracted and difficult as they have been, there might now be some space to start to talk about what the church has done over the past 20 years to make children safer in our schools, dioceses, parishes and homes.

It might now also be time to start talking about what different diocese and orders have done since the Commission started its work just under three and a half years ago – and there has been plenty.

More and more dioceses and congregations are engaging specialised child protection staff reporting directly to bishops and congregation leaders. Child protection policies are being overhauled and reporting and compliance requirements strengthened.

Congregations are putting in place new guidelines for dealing with survivors wanting to take claims to Court and many are opening up past settlements for reconsideration.

The albatross that is colloquially known as the Ellis defense is starting to become a thing of the past with dioceses and congregations on the record saying they will help identify a proper defendant in civil claims of child sexual abuse.

Many parishes are actively talking about how they can be involved in supporting child sex abuse survivors locally and what can be done within a parish to help.

And we are moving closer to setting up an independent church body to set, oversee and publically report on standards of child and vulnerable adult protections across the whole church in Australia.

The big challenge for us now is to find the language and the way in which we can communicate the very significant changes that have taken place without being seen to be trying to deflect from the crimes and failures of the past.

It will be a very long time before many in the community will be able to look at our church and say that it is now a different place but the fact is – much has changed and not just since the Commission started its work.

From the ground up we will need to start talking about these changes and what they mean for abuse survivors, children currently in our institutions and for the broader Catholic community.

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