

So what's next?

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After nearly three-and-a-half years into the Royal Commission's inquiry the overriding narrative of how institutions dealt with the sexual abuse of children is fairly obvious. Whether they were religious settings or not, the institutions placed their interests before those of the victims. Even worse, the officials often didn't believe the victims and sought evidence to further disprove their claims. Institutions kept the allegations from the police and other authorities. Where reparation was made available it was usually inadequate, haphazard and a drawn out affair.

In sum, the might of institutions far outweighed the needs, rights and dignity of their victims.

This miserable tale has been repeated time after time through the Royal Commission's public case studies. It is a scorching historical account.

That said, there is another story that has slowly emerged in the last twenty years – a story of restorative justice.

Putting it bluntly, once the Catholic bishops and religious leaders made a serious commitment to approach the child abuse scandal in a pastoral, rather than a defensive way, the needs of victims and the demands for restorative justice began to shape official complaints handling protocols and reparation schemes.

Of course for too many people this was a slow train coming. For others they still fell foul to poorly applied protocols and systems. But at least on an objective basis the development of *Towards Healing* and the Melbourne Response were seismic shifts in the Church's approach to victims.

Now the Royal Commission has distributed Issues Paper 11 calling for community input into various elements of the Catholic Church's life and culture. This clearly is a preliminary information collecting exercise prior to the scheduled final summary hearing for the Catholic Church in February next year. I think this indicates that the Commission is now very much in its second major phase of this inquiry. That is, beginning to identify the administrative areas that require remediation and realignment with best practice. In many ways this is integral to the lasting legacy of the Commission's work. What legislative and administrative requirements, safeguards, monitoring and commitments to continuous improvement need to be present in every organisation which involves children and services to children.

Of course there will be particular measures that the Catholic Church has and will put in place due to its arrangements, personnel and services. Telling that story will be important.

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