

A Church for our time 30 June 2016

This past week I accepted invitations to speak at Spirituality in the Pub in Bendigo, CatholicCare Melbourne's staff forum, and a parish community meeting in Mount Gambier in South Australia.

Yet again the depth of pain ordinary Catholics feel about the clerical sex abuse scandal was plainly evident.

It doesn't matter whether the event is organised from within the Church or from beyond, whether I am talking to parishioners, staff or the broader community, it is always the same reaction. A collective sense of shame and often anger.

Even though we are now well over three years into the life of the Royal Commission, facing the fact that past Church leaders mishandled, covered up and blatantly placed the interests of the institution before those of children and justice itself still renders most of us gobsmacked.

That said, there is an extraordinary willingness among many who attend these events to entertain hope for the Church. Whilst most people realise that although the Church of today did not perpetrate the crimes of the past, there is a general acknowledgement that only a collective response from the Church community will enable proper atonement for the abuse history.

This starts with holding all of us to account for revealing the truth and to justly redress the pain of those who have been abused. It also involves complying with the most stringent of standards to ensure that Catholic organisations, settings and events are safe for everyone.

On a deeper level it involves an awareness of the ways our culture promotes a form of clericalism, where many of those in positions of responsibility did and can use their positions in authoritative and domineering ways rather than as instruments for service and creativity.

It also includes a willingness to promote participation of lay people at all levels of decision making in the Church. The gifts and talents we all bring need to be acknowledged, utilised and respected. Gone are the days where the residue of medieval structures and processes can cut the mustard in modern Australia.

Significantly this mirrors the position of the Pope who recognises change is coming, that clericalism must be a thing of the past, that our leaders must be more accountable and transparent and that the talents of us all, but particularly women, must play a much greater part in the decisions that affect us all.

These sorts of comments, along with many others, are not coming from disengaged and disaffected Catholics. They consistently can be heard from loyal and practicing Catholics hell-bent on being part of the Church of the future.

They love their Church but want it to move into the 21st century. Their prayer is becoming almost an anthem - let's face the truth and become what we are meant to be.

Amen to that!

Francis Sullivan
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30 June 2016