

There's optimism on the horizon

2 August 2016

This week Fr Hans Zollner sj, who is President of the Commission for Child Protection at the Gregorian University in Rome, visited Ballarat to hear directly from victims and survivors. The visit of a delegate from Rome was seen as significant by many in the Ballarat community.

The *Ballarat Courier* reports Fr Zollner pledged his personal support to help Ballarat become a leading centre for healing, a commitment welcomed by Ballarat child abuse survivors, who said the church was a major contributing factor of much community damage and needed to be part of the healing process.

Another survivor acknowledged a lot has been done by the Church and that at some point we need to stop looking back and start looking forward. He said some schools that had been the least safe were now the safest.

These are encouraging words, coming from some of the strongest Ballarat advocates and give me some hope that the healing process, slow though it might be, is possible and that as more concrete measures are put in place victims and survivors can feel more confident that children are safer in Australian institutions including the Catholic Church.

For the past three and a half years the Royal Commission has done a mighty job uncovering some of the country's darkest secrets. It has exposed crimes and cover-ups, and damaging institutional cultures that saw vulnerable children suffer the most degrading experiences.

The revelations have shocked communities around Australia and internationally. It's been a traumatic time for victims and survivors as past crimes have been brought to the fore. The devastating life-long impact for many has been well documented. And for others, memories of the childhood experience gnaw at the edges of what appears to be a more functional life.

We know the Catholic Church rightly features in the Royal Commission's inquiry. It's responsible for around a third of the public hearings and figures in around a third of the stories told in private sessions to the Commissioners.

It's a sorry history. But as I've said in recent blogs, the last 20 years have seen a significant shift in the Church's approach to allegations of abuse and to child protection issues more broadly. And since the Royal Commission began its work in early 2013 many dioceses and religious orders have put in place very specific measures to make sure the protection of children and vulnerable people stays front of mind.

The Ballarat case study is the longest running hearing being considered by the Commission. Ballarat has been referred to as an epicentre of abuse and some of the most notorious offending priests operated out of that Diocese. The intergenerational impact on some parts of that community is unquestionable.

The positive comments from some of Ballarat's most active survivors indicate to me that if the Church works cooperatively and with good will with the survivors of abuse then we can move forward and positive things can happen. But we have to keep at it, there can be no let up.

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