

## **Royal Commission turns its focus to Catholic child sex abuse in the Hunter**

At about this time four years ago, the crisis of child sexual abuse in Australia had reached boiling point.

The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry was well underway, the Special Commission for Inquiry into the Catholic Diocese of Maitland Newcastle was about to commence and there were overwhelming calls for an Australia-wide royal commission into child sex abuse.

Much of that agitation was coming from the Hunter region, and the role of *The Herald* in Newcastle in driving the public advocacy for a Royal Commission cannot be underestimated.

During this time the crimes and cover-ups within the Catholic Church in Newcastle were rightly laid bare for all to see.

Now, after almost four years, as the Royal Commission enters its final phase, it, too, is turning its attention to what happened in the Catholic Church in Newcastle.

From next week the Commission will be looking into the response of Catholic Church authorities in the Maitland-Newcastle region to allegations of sexual abuse by clergy and religious.

The damage to survivors and victims, caused by the child abuse scandal can never be fully expressed or understood. Confused identities, broken homes, failed careers, unfulfilled dreams, and undermined communities.

The scandal has shaken the Catholic Church across Australia to its very foundations.

In the past three and a half years I've had well over a hundred meetings with different groups directly related to the work of the Commission. I've met with survivor groups, parish groups, lawyers, and people working in education and social services. And I've also met with priests, religious and volunteers who work in local communities around Australia.

Significantly, most of those public meetings have been held in local parishes, organised by local Catholics. The depth to which the child sex abuse scandal has affected people coming to these meetings, mostly ordinary, practicing Catholics, is profound.

The anger at the Church leaders who failed to protect children and who covered up for offending priests, religious and others is more than evident. The demands for the current Church leaders to be fully open and transparent is unmistakable and the sadness and compassion for the people who have suffered, and who suffer still, as a result of the abuse is palpable.

In places like the Hunter, Ballarat, Townsville and regional Western Australia, the Commission has exposed the abuse of power within the Catholic Church and the depravity that that unleashed.

While the Commission has been going about its work, the media has been documenting events, and survivors and victims have continued their call for justice.

Many people could be forgiven for thinking Catholic and other major institutions have been sitting on their hands as the extent and depth of the abuse has been exposed.

At least for the Catholic Church this is not true.

We've developed and put in place new guidelines to be used when victims and survivors want to revisit their claims. And there are new civil litigation guidelines that help church authorities identify an entity for victims and survivors to sue. The Church has also maintained its call for an independent, national redress scheme, which would provide fair and just compensation for abuse victims.

We've also seen widespread implementation of safeguarding officers and structures within dioceses and religious orders.

And while the Maitland Newcastle Dioceses has had in place for some time a ground-breaking approach to the Church's response to child sexual abuse, the Catholic Church, Australia-wide will never be able to do enough to alleviate the pain and suffering that so many children and young people have endured and continue to live with.

What I hope we are seeing at this point in the Royal Commission's work is not just policy responses to emerging issues, but the beginning of a genuine cultural shift in the Catholic Church and other institutions that have been exposed by the work of this Royal Commission and the myriad other inquiries.

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25 August 2016