

Newcastle hearing shows we've got a long way to go

We are presently involved in the 13th case study involving the Catholic Church in this Royal Commission. Case Study 43 is looking at the response of church authorities in the Maitland Newcastle region to allegations of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious.

The detailed testimonies from abuse survivors once again have been shocking, confronting and shameful.

The mere fact that middle aged men courageously retold their stories in a hushed and shocked court room was poignant enough.

That their stories were just another set of entries into the sordid history of the sexual abuse of children within the Catholic Church adds to the corrosive impact this scandal has had on the credibility of the Church.

Just as with other churches with histories of child abuse, the fact that it did occur and that it was mishandled, even covered up, severed the sacred trust these churches held with the community.

Time and time again the integrity of Catholic Church entities, be they dioceses or religious orders, has been called into question.

When actions don't match rhetoric credibility is the casualty.

The "trust us" test is lost.

Sadly this is now such a familiar scenario as each case study has revealed. Even though the events in question occurred decades ago, their impact on the moral character of the Church has had a long-term impact. Whether the issue is sexual ethics, justice or even the sanctity of marriage, the Church's pronouncements are shadowed by the events portrayed in the Royal Commission.

Until the community perceives that the Church has truly atoned for this scandal, much of what it says will fall on deaf ears.

This is demoralising for all those who toil in Catholic organisations to deliver essential services in the community.

That said there is a distinction between the Church services and ministries of today and how some were conducted in the past. Catholic schools, hospitals, welfare services go to great lengths to create safe environments for children. In many cases they are at the forefront of best practice in this area. This goes some way towards restoring trust in the community.

However the Church leadership needs to keep pushing the envelope to demonstrate that the culture that led to the scandal is being addressed and remedied. A challenge of the highest proportion.

Also this week, I see Bishop Paul Bird in Ballarat has announced that the estate of the former bishop Ronald Mulkearns, which was left to the Diocese, will all go to supporting victims of abuse. The estate is reported

to be valued in the order of \$2million. This is a welcome announcement and will, hopefully, mean that abuse survivors in Ballarat will have greater access to pastoral and other services offered by the Diocese and also receive continuing compensation.

I'll take this opportunity to correct last week's blog in which I listed a number of dioceses that have been included in Royal Commission hearings. Townsville was included in that list, but has not been the subject of a Royal Commission hearing.

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