

Challenges ahead for institutional Church leadership

For the last month we have been consumed by two case studies, back to back, in the Royal Commission. On anyone's reckoning this was an unrelenting examination of how the local Catholic officials in the dioceses of Newcastle, Armidale, Sydney and Parramatta handled abuse by clerics and religious brothers.

Even after nearly four years in this job, it still confounds me to witness the way the institutional Church really was not up to the mark in properly dealing with perpetrators, alerting authorities and justly dealing with victims and their families.

This all too familiar tale is indeed a deep wound in the heart of the Church. It has undermined the confidence of Catholics, clergy and those in religious life. It has challenged our understanding of what the Church was about. Hypocrisy is hard to swallow.

At times like this people want answers and a sense of reassurance that real changes have happened and will continue to happen. Frankly, that task will take more than a few public statements from Church leaders. It will require a demonstrated roll out of practical steps that show that vigilance, prevention, training, supervision and accountability measures are all in place for the safeguarding of children and vulnerable people.

Even more, it will require tangible signs that leaders take seriously the task of professionalising decision making, record keeping and legitimate follow up with victims and their families.

Most importantly, it will require the Church's leaders to show that even when the Royal Commission has run its course that there will not be a complacent return to 'business as usual'!

Fortunately, the bishops and religious leaders are taking the real steps to modernise how professional standards and safeguarding are administered in the Church. They are also actively supporting calls for independently administered redress schemes. This does give hope where so little light has been for too long.

As we now prepare for the final hearing of the Catholic Church in early 2017 we need to openly embrace the difficult questions around why the scandal occurred in the Church to the extent that it did, and why it was handled the way that it was. There is no point raising issues unless we are prepared to learn from them and to put things right.

This is our time and this is our calling.

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