

And so this is Christmas

Francis Sullivan 22 December 2016

The past 12 months have been a big year for the Church as we continue to engage with the Royal Commission and develop new policies and approaches to the protection of children and vulnerable adults in our parishes, schools, hospitals and welfare agencies.

When the Commission was announced in 2012 by then Prime Minister Gillard no one thought it would be still running at the end of 2016, let alone with another year still to go.

It has been a long difficult process for everyone involved, most of all the survivors of institutional abuse who have been fighting a long and hard battle for justice and compassion for many decades.

This year the Catholic Church has been the primary focus of three Royal Commission case studies and has been involved in another three case studies to a lesser level.

As you all know being the focus of a case study is a daunting and scarifying exercise. It involves confronting the shocking and disturbing stories of abuse survivors as they reveal, often for the first time the horrors of the abuse they suffered as children and its devastating legacy throughout their lives.

It also involves church leaders and others giving evidence before the Commission about how they have dealt with allegations and crimes of child sexual abuse in their dioceses or congregations.

Some Church witnesses have come away from these hearings clearly moved by the process and having, as they say, left nothing on the field. Others, either by design or through an inability to grasp the full consequences of where they are and what they are doing, have not been as forthright.

But in all the Catholic case studies the Council has worked hard to make sure that the Commission has received every document it has requested, has heard from every witness it wanted and has received the full cooperation of the Church.

Throughout the year we have also invested a lot of time and energy developing the Church's reform agenda.

Significant among this work has been the development of the Church's new standards company, Catholic Professional Standards, which has been set up to independently oversee the safety of children and vulnerable adults through developing, auditing and publicly reporting on church and other standards across Australia.

CPS is a completely new way of dealing with professional standards across the Catholic Church in Australia. It is ground breaking work that many people across the Church have made a major commitment to and have shown guts and determination to see it come to life. They all deserve our thanks and congratulations.

We also played a very significant part in pushing for the Commission's redress proposal and the Government's ultimate endorsement of the scheme. I think it's fair to say that outside of survivors and their advocacy groups, the Catholic Church, through the Council, has worked harder than anyone else for the scheme. This has been met with support from many and claims of self-serving from some.

Regardless of how some might view our motives, the facts are that history will view the establishment of an independent redress scheme that delivers fair consistent and just redress for survivors regardless of where or when they were abused will be towards the very top of the this Commission's achievements.

We have also continued our commitment to meet with and listen to as many individuals and groups who are interested in the work of the Commission and the Council as we possibly can. I would say we've had at least one of these meetings a week over the past year.

Every time I speak with parish groups, survivors, clergy, schools or welfare groups I come away convinced of two things.

First, that both the Catholic and broader community are dumbstruck at the extent of the abuse in the Church and the lengths to which past leaders went to cover it up and, second, that everyone wants to see change, wants to see survivors treated properly and wants guarantees that it can never happen again.

As we head into the final year of the Commission there is still a pressing urgency for more to change.

There is still as great a need as ever for all of us to be acutely aware of the immense damage that child sexual abuse inflicts, for the need to offer a helping hand and to allow survivors to reconnect not just with the Church, if that's what they want, but with their communities and their families.

Christmas isn't always an easy time. There can be loneliness and tension, unresolved memory and even long-held grudges.

It can also be a time of healing and forgiveness. Let's hope that it is a time where we can be better connected and more hopeful together.

To you and yours, a happy Christmas and a just as happy New Year.