

THE AUSTRALIAN

January 6, 2017

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Catholic leaders across Australia have welcomed a letter from the Pope saying the church “weeps bitterly” over the sexual abuse of children by priests, ahead of a final royal commission investigation into how these crimes could occur.

In what represents one of the most frank admissions of institutional failure by any pontiff, Pope Francis used the letter to say: “We ... weep for this sin. The sin of what happened, the sin of failing to help, the sin of covering up and denial, the sin of abuse of power.”

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse will hold a final, three-week hearing next month attempting to establish how widespread this abuse is and what cultural issues allowed it to occur.

About 40 per cent of the thousands of victims who have given evidence in private to the commission say they were abused in Catholic institutions. The hearing is expected to investigate the role of the Vatican, canon law, celibacy and the use of secrecy within the church.

Brisbane archbishop Mark Coleridge said the letter, sent to bishops worldwide and which also talks about the trafficking and starvation suffered by children, was meant to support church leaders “to gather up the tears of the young”.

“This Pope has a peculiar ability to speak in a way that both challenges and encourages ... he can speak a searing word at times, but its effect is not to discourage but to encourage,” Archbishop Coleridge said.

While the royal commission is “an extremely blunt instrument ... if all we do is change policies and procedures and protocols without changing culture we’ll be dealing with the same problems again and again and again,” the Archbishop said.

Hobart archbishop Julian Porteous also welcomed the letter, saying “in the light of the royal commission and our own engagement with it and response to it, this would fit in very much with the approach we would be taking as bishops”.

“Firstly, recognising the terrible damage that’s been done to so many people and secondly, doing everything we can to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

While the true numbers of clerical abusers and their victims is unknown, a series of child abuse scandals has rocked the church worldwide in recent decades.

In Australia, estimates suggest about 4-5 per cent of Catholic priests or brothers may have been sex offenders. This compares with about 1-2 per cent of the general male population who are convicted for a sexual offence against adults.

Justin Driscoll, vicar-general of Ballarat in Victoria, where generations of children were abused by priests, said "in acknowledging the crimes committed, we renew our commitment to ensuring that our church communities are safe places for all".

The church had instituted various reforms since the establishment of the royal commission, he said, including establishing a national Catholic Professional Standards body that will promote "accountability, transparency and trust".

In contrast, Anthony Foster, two of whose daughters were abused by their priest in Melbourne, said the Pope's letter was "really just more spin and words".

"They sound like good words; if they were put into practice right down to the grassroots level, really caring about victims, it would be great," he said.

"But time and time again we have heard words like these from the church. Time and time again we have been let down."