

Catholic Church final hearing

People on the east of the country have been sweltering under intense heat. Test match victories and early hopeful signs at the tennis have helped ease the discomfort!

Despite that they say that wise men come from the East. The wisest headed west for the holidays!

Now that I am back at my desk the heat turns to preparations for the upcoming final hearing of the Catholic Church at the Royal Commission.

It begins on 6 February and is expected to run for three weeks. Unlike the case studies this hearing will be less forensic in nature and more of an exploration of the causes and contributing factors for the institutional responses from Church Authorities to child sex abuse cases.

As I have previously mentioned this is an important hearing and is vital to the overall assessment the Commission will make of the Church's response to this scandal.

Last year I mentioned that we all need to be mindful of the 'time warp' that can trap our thinking about the incidence of and response to child abuse. The history of abuse in the Catholic Church has been confronting and shameful. There is no excuse for it.

There may well be reasons why it occurred but the fact that it did cannot be merely contextualised away.

In its private sessions and through its data collection the Royal Commission has an estimate of the extent of the sexual abuse of children within the Church. I am sure this will be made public in the hearing and I for one am bracing myself for this revelation.

This will be the first time anywhere in the world that the data of the Catholic Church on child sexual abuse has been compiled and analysed for public consideration.

The data and the evidence from expert witnesses will make for an intense examination of the abuse scandal.

It will point to cultural and sociological issues in the Catholic Church in Australia – how decision making occurred, who was involved and why. It will look at where responsibility fell and to what degree accountability and compliance processes were effectively deployed.

The hearing will seek to provide an understanding of how priests and religious were selected and trained in decades past as well as in current times.

All this within the general understanding that sexual abuse of children has occurred across institutions, and almost universally those institutions had cultures of cover up and obfuscation.

We have engaged in this Commission process openly and in a spirit of co-operation.

This will be the 20th public hearing involving the Catholic Church and the 15th directly focused on the Catholic Church.

It will be an important exploration of a devastating chapter in the history of the Catholic Church in Australia. And it will be difficult for the Catholic community. But the revelations will provide a litmus for how we as Church recover and move on from this low point.

Francis Sullivan
CEO Catholic Church's Truth Justice and Healing Council
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