

Royal Commission Case Study 50

Catholic Church Final Hearing



Monday 6 February 2017 – Day 1

Day one of the Royal Commission's wrap up hearing into the Catholic Church began yesterday.

The hearing will inquire into:

1. factors that may have contributed to the occurrence of child sexual abuse at Catholic Church institutions in Australia;
2. factors that may have affected the institutional response of Catholic Church authorities in Australia to child sexual abuse;
3. the responses of Catholic Church authorities in Australia to relevant case study report(s) and other Royal Commission reports; and
4. data relating to the extent of claims of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church of Australia.

At the start of the hearing Senior Counsel Assisting the Commission, Gail Furness, gave a summary of key results of the Royal Commission's data survey on abuse claims in Catholic Church institutions.

In her address, Ms Furness said a survey revealed 4,444 alleged incidents of abuse between January 1980 and February 2015 were made to Catholic Church authorities.

Ms Furness told the hearing 1,880 alleged perpetrators were identified in claims of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Of these, 32 per cent were religious brothers, 30 per cent were priests, 29 per cent were lay people and 5 per cent were sisters.

The commission heard that more than a third of people who gave evidence in private sessions over the past four years reported abuse in Catholic institutions.

Ms Furness said the testimony of survivors was "harrowing" and "the accounts were depressingly familiar."

She said the Commission has made 309 referrals to police in all states and the ACT in relation to allegations of child sexual abuse involving Catholic Church institutions, with 27 prosecutions resulting.

In a statement to the Commission, Francis Sullivan, Chief Executive Officer of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, which assisted the Royal Commission in obtaining the data, said the numbers were shocking.

"They are tragic and they are indefensible. Each entry in this data ... represents a child who suffered at the hands of someone who should have cared for and protected them. As Catholics, we hang our heads in shame," he said.

The afternoon heard evidence from Dr Fr David Ranson, Vicar General of Broken Bay Diocese and Dr Fr Michael Whelan, a Marist Father and Parish Priest of St Patrick's Church Hill.

Both spoke of their experience of formation for the priesthood and gave their views of what had contributed to child sexual abuse within the Church.

Dr Whelan said that celibacy can be lived out very, very well but that the church's law of compulsory celibacy is misguided. "It should not be in place, I think it's unjust, actually", he said.

Dr Ranson said men who chose to live the celibate life without a calling were setting themselves up for living in quiet desperation and conflict.

Dr Ranson said long years of initial formation are not productive and that it's far better to consider shorter terms of initial formation but much more developed structures of ongoing formation. "You cannot learn about life in a cocoon," he said.

Discussion also focused on the limited role of women in the church and the need for independent, professional supervision of priests and bishops in line with the practice required of other professions.

And they called on greater transparency in governance and church structures.

The hearing continues tomorrow.

Contact: Michael Salmon, Director Communications, 0417 495 018