

Royal Commission Case Study 50

Catholic Church Final Hearing



Wednesday 8 February 2017 – Day 3

On day 3 of the Royal Commission's hearing panel members discussed structural and cultural issues, including accountability and transparency.

The panel comprised Dr Maureen Cleary, Governance and Management consultant; Patrick Parkinson, Professor Law at the University of Sydney; Peter Johnstone, President of Catholics for Renewal; and Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane and member of the Supervisory Group and the Truth Justice and Healing Council.

Dr Cleary described her extensive work with church and not for profit organisations, particularly in the area of lay participation.

She told the Commission the institutional church has a lot to learn from women religious institutes which have run a majority of church-based services.

She said the Royal Commission has shown the clergy have been very deficient in keeping up with their own knowledge and formation.

She referred to former Adelaide Archbishop Faulkner's successful efforts to share his executive power with lay and religious women, noting that in the clerical church good things happen because of the presence of good people who are not trapped by clericalism.

Dr Cleary said the Church's network of professional standards offices have been poorly resourced and inconsistently funded by local bishops, setting them up for failure.

Professor Patrick Parkinson has been involved in child protection for nearly 30 years.

He told the Commission that church structure undermines the Church's capacity to respond to child sexual abuse. He said mandatory celibacy, combined with emotional and sometimes geographic isolation is causative and explains some of the shocking figures in the Royal Commission's data survey.

And added that there is a need to find a way to engage the laity in the organisation and spiritual running of the church.

Peter Johnstone said that Catholics for Renewal is a group of committed Catholics established to respond to what they saw as the dysfunctional governance of the Church and its inadequate response to the sexual abuse of children.

He said the governance of the Church is dysfunctional. It failed to measure up against principles of good governance including accountability, transparency, leadership, listening and aligning the leadership of that organisation with its mission.

He expressed concern that bishops can take decisions in secret without any accountability.

Peter Johnstone said that for cultural change you need leadership change and recommended that the 2020 Synod be preceded by a series of synods where bishops of the country listen to the people.

Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane, told the Commission that cultural change in the Church is extremely difficult. He said Pope Francis and the Royal Commission are catalysts for cultural change and that it won't be business as usual post Royal Commission.

"I think that's probably true, that we haven't yet embraced adequately a transparency that is appropriate and even necessary for an unusual community of communities like the Catholic Church," he told the Commission.

He said there is 'evidence of a lingering culture – that we do our own thing, we are a law unto ourselves. We hope the Royal Commission can help us with what that is and how we can go about it.'

Archbishop Coleridge said that he adopted a policy of, where possible, preferring to appoint a woman to an executive role in the Archdiocese and that he has built up good relations with religious women.

He said the Brisbane archdiocese has made genuine attempts to introduce accountability mechanisms for clergy, referring to the appointment of a Vicar for Priests, Priest in charge of clergy, life and ministry as evidence of this.

The last witness to give evidence today, Jesuit Priest Fr Gerry O'Hanlon, gave evidence via video link from Ireland.

Fr O'Hanlon is a past provincial of the Jesuits in Ireland and has extensive experience in the issue of handling child sexual abuse cases within the Irish Jesuits.

He gave evidence about some of the factors he considered had given rise to the child sexual abuse crisis in Ireland including the elevated status of the clergy, the passive role of children and the fact sociologists and psychologists had taken time to come to understand the phenomenon.

The hearing continues tomorrow.

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