

## **'Watch this space' reform in the Church must continue**

Francis Sullivan - 22 February 2017

Week three of the final Catholic Church hearing at the Royal Commission is not all bad news. This is the week that Church leaders are appearing to explain why the scandal has occurred and what can be done to make the Church safer for children and people generally.

One after another the leaders are outlining the changes to structures and process they have put in place to better meet protection and prevention standards. But they are also emphasising the need for a cultural shift in the Church.

A shift towards more mutual participation of the laity in governance and management of the Church including the participation of women.

Of course we have heard this all before but at least now these sentiments, hopefully even more than that, are expressed within the recognition that the Church of today needs to address the diversity of the society in which it works.

This does not just mean ethnic diversity, but the glaring gender imbalance within the Church when it comes to those who can participate in serious decision making and influence on the daily workings of the Church.

No longer is this a radical siren call but hopefully now it can be rightfully seen for what it is. An acknowledgement of entitlement.

Parramatta Bishop, Vincent Long Van Ngyuen, told the Commission he believes the marginalisation of women and the laity is part of the culture of clericalism that has contributed to the sexual abuse crisis.

"I think if we are serious about reform, this is one of the areas that we need to look at," he said. "The laity have no meaningful or direct participation in the appointment, supervision and even removal of the parish priest. I think that needs to change."

Bishop Long described the current structure of the Church as "a neat, almost divinely inspired, pecking order...heavily tilted towards the ordained."

"So you have the pope, the cardinals, the bishops, religious, consecrated men and women, and the laity right at the bottom of the pyramid. I think we need to dismantle that model of Church," he said.

The other stark issue that keeps confronting all leaders is the less than satisfactory way in which the Church is dealing with victims. It is still too rigid, cautious, even frightened about how to respond to victims.

Of course some survivors have had good experiences with the Church but far too many have not.

Leaders warmly speak of their concern, even heart break for victims, but there is still a gap between that emotional reaction and the practical response to those damaged by the Church.

In many ways this is a 'watch this space' time for the Church. Then again that only works for those with the time to wait!