

The Heart of the Church

Francis Sullivan – 10 March 2017

This week I spoke at a forum organised by the National Committee for Professional Standards at which the recently passed Royal Commission was amongst the issues discussed.

Around 150 people were there, including directors of the state and diocesan offices, representatives from religious orders and PJPs, a number of bishops, and many, many people who work at the coalface in our safeguarding offices and elsewhere.

As we all look to the future, delegates were keen to hear about the new Catholic Professional Standards Ltd, legislative changes, the future of *Towards Healing* and the Melbourne Response, and other matters.

But as the dust settles following the Royal Commission's final hearing into the Catholic Church, it's time to pause and reflect on some of the deeper issues emerging.

There was so much said at so many levels at the Royal Commission's final hearing that will impact on us as Church - the insidiousness of clericalism, the influence of the Vatican, the exclusive structure of the church and much more.

Discernment is the key now. We need to think about – and frankly we need to pray about – what we have heard and where to from now.

After almost four years of intense scrutiny of dioceses and religious orders many people are left bruised and confused at many different levels. There's a feeling that our church is up for grabs.

The past four years have laid down a real challenge to the heart of the church not least to the way in which institutional and pastoral approaches to the survivors of child sexual abuse are responded to. The different ways we respond to survivors have been examined, and rightly at many levels, hung out to dry.

But the people are the church and we have to reclaim the heart of the church.

The statistics about allegations of abuse in dioceses and religious orders, released during the hearing, were so profoundly shocking. They reflected not just the horror of decades of unbridled abuse but also to some extent the behaviour of the Church and what at the time was most important to its leaders and administrators.

The broad sweeping behaviour of a church should reflect its heart not its shell. So how are we going to manifest, to reassert, the heart of the church in a credible, authentic and practical way.

There's something about being Catholic that we need to reclaim. And we all face the challenge of remaining catholic in light of the revelations of the Royal Commission. We have to look at how a modern Australian church will govern itself.

In the lead up to the 2020 Plenary, we must not lose momentum. We have to engage beyond our comfort zone and tap into more than what has come out of the Royal Commission. We need to reach out to the 90 per cent of Catholics who don't turn up. In a creative spirit we must seek a new heart, a new way of being church.

We need to go to our own spiritual well and to quietly consider. Let's re engage together.