

SPEECH

Catalyst for Renewal Incorporated – Villa Maria Parish, Hunter's Hill Sydney

Where to from here?

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**Check against delivery

It was only last month that we were confronted with the devastating statistics of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church.

I don't think anyone was prepared for the extent of the abuse and the appalling rate across male religious orders and within the priesthood.

Frankly, even though there had already been 15 case studies conducted by the Royal Commission into various instances of abuse in either religious orders or dioceses, the release of the allegations data really put a stake through the heart of our Church.

And that is the point.

The fact that a Church actually has to acknowledge that abuse occurred within its ranks and that it exercised a systemic cover up – even to the point of never releasing its own data voluntarily to the community – speaks volumes for the way it has lost touch with its very purpose, its very heart.

When I started this role I had no real sense of the scope and extent of child abuse within the Church.

I thought that maybe the Church had up to 100 paedophiles in its history.

So far, our records indicate that more than 1,200 priests and brothers have had an allegation of abuse made against them.

To put this in context, in the USA, around 5 percent of diocesan priests were the subject of allegations. In Australia that figure is around 8 percent.

In some of the male religious orders the percentages were gob-smacking.

In the St John of God brothers, well over a third of the order in early times had abuse allegations made against them.

Twenty two per cent of Christian Brothers had allegations made against them and the Marists were not far behind.

These figures speak of a moral disease that profoundly infects not only the communities of religious orders and dioceses, but the wider Catholic community.

It is a disease that is ingrained, almost cemented, within the culture of the Church.

This fact has not been lost on the Royal Commission.

In its final hearing into the Church the Commission spent three intense weeks examining some of the cultural issues that have contributed to the abuse scandal.

At one point the five senior archbishops sat together in the witness box, attempting to explain the way in which clericalism, celibacy, power, institutional might and other issues played a part in the entire scandalous affair.

My sense is that they toiled in vain.

There is now a deep malaise compounded by a simmering anger within the community about the Church and child sexual abuse.

The unprecedented level of inquiry brought on by the Royal Commission has laid bare a history that the Church authorities have purposefully sought to keep from public witness for decades.

The posturing and spin of years past has been seen for what it was – an avoidance of the truth and a failed attempt to divert the public from the scale of the abuse and the depths to which Church officials had sunk as they tried to keep it hidden.

Moreover it was also a deliberate effort to keep senior Church figures who were implicated in the mismanagement or worse of this scandal out of the public gaze.

And what is most confounding is that none of this was constructed out of any agreed plan on the part of the Church leadership as a whole.

There was no secret meeting of leaders in which the strategy of concealment and cover-up was formulated.

The way in which leaders responded to abuse allegations, to move priests, to ignore evidence, to dismiss claims, was consistent.

It was as if it had been built into their DNA.

In most western countries the leaders of Catholic Church authorities have acted in the same way. Almost as if there was a roadmap to follow.

Yet there has been no roadmap, rather an institutional culture hell-bent on self-protection and self-preservation.

Ironically at the very same time that the Australian Church is being rotisserie by the Royal Commission we have the phenomenon of Pope Francis.

Like a godsend Francis appeared on the scene in 2013 – just before our first case study.

So, as the Royal Commission began to unwind the Church edifice on this scandal, the Holy Father likewise began to dismantle the institutional cultural bulwark that has strangled the life out of the modern Church.

And as with any reform process there have been bumps along the road.

In today's media there are many reports from senior US cardinals extolling the efforts and outcomes of the Pope in changing the culture of the Church.

The cardinals from Washington, Chicago and Boston to a man speak of the Pope's shrewdness in placing a new vision and attitude for the Church at the forefront of reforms.

They very clearly say that Pope Francis is reigniting the spirit, intent and teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

The Church is no more in restoration mode, but now is to be unashamedly engaged in the modern world.

There are many quotes I could point to, to back this up. Here is but one from Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl:

This is a very different culture than even 25 years ago...we know now we have to move from what was a much more comfortable maintenance posture into a much more challenging, Gospel-driven, evangelizing discipleship, to use Francis' words.

However, as I said, there have been bumps along the way and the child sexual abuse scandal must surely be one of the biggest flaws.

It was recently reported that the Pope is starting to go light on some priests who have been found to have abused children.

Nicole Winfield, a highly regarded religious reporter for The Associated Press, recently wrote about the case of the notorious Italian abuser Fr. Mauro Inzoli. She wrote:

The Inzoli case is one of several in which Francis overruled the advice of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and reduced a sentence that called for the priest to be defrocked. Instead, the priests were sentenced to penalties including a lifetime of penance and prayer and removal from public ministry.

You have to seriously wonder whether this isn't the Pope backsliding on what has been a strong and determined crack down on offending priests and the circumstances that allow abuse to take place.

The second very concerning development in Rome over the past couple of weeks has been the resignation of the last remaining, publicly identified, abuse survivor from the Pope's Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Marie Collins.

As most of you know the Commission was set up by Pope Francis to advise him on how best to deal with the many issues associated with child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

In an interview with the Jesuit outlet, *America*, she denounces "the resistance" and "lack of cooperation" with the commission by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and "some" Vatican officials.

She also denounces the "clericalism" she has found in some parts of the Roman Curia, and the "reluctance" of the CDF to implement the Commission's recommendations – even after Pope Francis had approved them.

Ultimately she reflected on whether the resistance to the commission is in fact resistance to the Pope himself.

Together these two developments paint a picture of the Vatican establishment, its bureaucrats and courtiers, doing all they can to either undermine the Pope or driving an agenda that is about maintaining the status quo and protecting the institution. Business as usual.

What can we draw from these two very disturbing developments?

For my mind the clearest message is this. If people of good will, the good priests, the willing religious, the enlightened leaders, but more importantly people like you – the engaged and informed Catholics – don't continue to push for change then, as sure as night follows day, the reactionaries will overcome and nothing will change.

If we do not continue to push – and push hard – the impetus for change will fade, inertia will set in, reformists will be shunned, and the victims of what has been the greatest betrayal in the Catholic Church in Australia will remain mired in hopelessness, despair and anger.

This is a very dangerous time for the Catholic Church in Australia.

If the Church in Australia doesn't see continuous, concerted change from our leaders driven and backed by an active and demanding Catholic Community, then our Church as a religion will become a marginalized rump, stripped of credibility and relevance, left to preach to an ever aging congregation with eyes on an ever dimming here after.

The Royal Commission's final hearing into the Catholic Church finished two weeks ago today.

The three-week case study heard evidence from theologians, academics, religious leaders, bishops, archbishops, priests, lawyers, canon lawyers, psychologists, management consultants, Catholic education, welfare service providers, professional standards executives, international church representatives and others.

They spoke about how and why the abuse occurred for so long, what's working and what isn't and how the church needs to change.

Evidence ranged across issues such as:

- canon law and its interaction with civil law and the secrecy provisions within it;
- clericalism and the abuse of power;
- celibacy and what part it might have had in the extent of abuse in the Church;
- the confessional;
- psycho-sexual development, or lack of it, for priests and seminarians;
- formation and training of seminarians;
- professional training and basic administrative failings of bishops;
- the Vatican and its failure to come to terms with and acknowledge its failures in dealing with abuse;
- Church history and significant milestones including the Second Vatican Council and what has or hasn't been implemented; and
- lay leadership, including the need for women in decision-making positions.

More than anything else the Commission returned to the Church's culture, and the need for change.

This was a theme that was endorsed by all senior leaders who gave evidence.

The commissioners are now using the testimony and evidence from this last and many other hearings to understand:

- why clergy abuse occurred on such a massive scale within the church;
- why the response to complaints was so flawed; and
- what has been done internally to address the cultural, structural, and governance factors that contributed.

Here's the rub.

For the 250 or so people sitting here tonight listening to me speak, none of what I've just said is new.

None of what I've said comes as a surprise.

It doesn't come as a surprise to you that within our Church there are major problems and at the heart of them is a culture which must change.

And for me, key to this are two questions:

- what is it about us as a people that we were so permissive and docile that we didn't demand more transparency, accountability and integrity from our administrator?; and
- why have we been prepared as a Catholic community to not address issues as matters of urgency and profound importance, preferring instead for the most part to sit on our hands and grumble from outside the boundary line?

This passivity in the Catholic community, in large part, comes from the encultured way in which even highly intelligent people acquiesce to authority figures in the Church.

It becomes what I like to describe as the 'altar boy' syndrome.

In truth it is adults not acting with responsibility, not taking part with a mature yet demanding sense of agency within the Church.

When this doesn't happen, as was certainly the case up till more recent times, we are left with blind loyalty instead of mature conversation.

We are left with blinkered defensiveness and knee jerk reactions rather than open-mindedness, willingness and engagement.

This all leads to a heavy sense of inertia where energies turn in on themselves, people become demoralized, and ultimately are defeated by the system – or they simply leave.

So there are a number of ways we can go from here. Build a church on those who remain, the regular participants; or we can have the courage to go out to those who have left, understand their disillusionment and make the changes that are so dangerously needed.

On many occasions I'm asked who should be responsible for the abuse that took place in our Church.

One view is that the current leadership should take the fall and resign, en masse, given they now represent organisational and leadership failures that have brought the Church in Australia to its lowest ebb.

Others say the magnitude of the abuse within the Catholic Church disqualifies it from receiving any public benefits – taxation relief and an automatic voice in national debates that determine public policy – not just on the moral and philosophical direction of our country, but also on so much of the nation's health, education and welfare agendas.

While both of these considerations are extreme they are not surprising.

As I've said before, within the Church there is a heavy underlying malaise, and externally there is a profound degree of mistrust and scepticism.

What will it take for this to change?

For what it's worth I'd like to suggest just a few things.

One: any church leader who has ever pronounced apologies or actions or sentiments or commitments to putting victims and survivors first must be held to account by the Catholic community, because my observation is that the Royal Commission has viewed many of these statements with scepticism.

Two: we need a stringent policy of putting the right people, with the right skills, in the right places all the time.

In other words we cannot afford the blunders of incompetent administration, advisors and minders and we certainly can't afford the fumbled attempts to use spin and PR to protect and cotton wool church leaders from facing the consequences of their actions, or in many cases, inactions.

Three: diocesan and church organisations need to open the doors and the windows to genuine participation of the Catholic community in how their money is spent, and in the proper planning to make the church relevant in the daily lives of the people in our community.

Four: church leaders should publically commit to employment ratios for women in senior positions and encourage diversity in their workplaces.

Five: Church leaders must demonstrate a move away from a church of privilege, of comfortable lifestyles far removed from many of the faithful.

As the Pope says we need to become a:

Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.

Six: Church leaders should publically commit now to a public consultation and deliberative process on all issues within the Catholic community that are the source of respectful dissent and even disengagement.

I'm sure many of you have your own ideas that could be added to this list.

And while the leadership of our church and the changes that need to take place must be prominent in all our hearts and minds there are also other considerations.

Most of us in one way or another are all seeking a pathway to meaning.

We are all seeking a sense of being on a genuine spiritual path and I worry that we will become so caught up in seeking structural changes, almost for change in itself, we will lose or shift attention from the deeper more profound journey.

What has shocked and confronted me the most about this sex abuse scandal is that it took place in a church.

The very fact that the church was on trial, rips at the heart of what the church is meant to be.

And that speaks to me of a profound loss of direction, integrity, purpose and meaning at the heart of the church.

A spiritual wasteland.

It is my sense that so many Catholics share that shock.

People say the Church now needs to get its house back in order but I say we have to re-build the house.

Let's not put the same foundations in place that delivered us this scandalous history – this profound moral and criminal upheaval.

Why was it that moral leadership failed so consistently, so pervasively?

Where was the wisdom and counsel we have been lead to believe comes from those on the spiritual journey?

We must address this spiritual bankruptcy as much as anything else.

Over the past four years I have spoken to many different groups and organisations about the abuse crisis and the future of the church in Australia.

Their overarching concern points towards the willingness, or otherwise, of the church leadership to instigate change.

The questions asked are always very similar.

Will senior church leaders have the courage to foster a discussion about human sexuality in all its different guises?

Will there be a genuine attempt to reform power and decision making processes?

Will there be serious and sustained innovation in ministry shared by women and married lay folk?

Will the church redirect resources to educate adults as well as children in how to live a contemporary Christian life?

Will our church become a movement for justice rather than a pillar of the establishment?

What tangible signs will be offered that demonstrate our church is a place for all regardless of gender, sexual orientation, past histories or family circumstances?

Will our leaders, both overtly and otherwise, reflect the communities they serve rather than expect the deference that divides?

Again, I'm sure you have many questions that could be added to this list.

But at the very least, answers to some of these questions could be the KPIs of a church that is changing.

Sadly, too often, they are millstones for one that won't.

As I said in the Truth Justice and Healing Council's statement to the Royal Commission at the start of this last hearing it is vital that the culture of the Church that enabled the abuse of privilege and power which led to the crimes and cover-up be confronted head on, not only by those in positions of authority but also by the Catholic Community as a whole.

Changes must be made, and if they are not made willingly they will most certainly be forced upon us.

While words are important, the measure of commitment can only ever be gauged by actions.

To the abuse survivors who are here tonight and to the many thousands spread out across our communities I say the wrongs of the past must be repaired, survivors must be shown the compassion and justice they have been calling for, and change must be embedded in the culture of the Church.

Thank you.

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