

Where the real change is needed, the institutional culture

Francis Sullivan 16 March 2017

This week I was asked in a TV interview how is it that I can speak out in the media about the problems and changes that need to be made in the Catholic church to address so many of the issues around the child sexual abuse scandal yet don't seem to be saying the same things to the Church leadership.

Virginia Trioli asked me on Monday why is it that I go on her program and talk about the 'great problems of the Catholic Church. 'Can't you tell the Catholic Church directly yourself, they are your employer?' she asked.

There are two things here.

Firstly everything I say in public is also said directly to the Church leaders, they are very clear on the various positions the Council has taken on the many issue the Commission has examined and, to a person, they have been supportive of all the recommendations we have made.

There seems to be a general feeling in much of the commentary around the church and child safety that not much has changed. This is far from the truth.

Over the past two decades and certainly over the past four years the way the Church engages with children, is unrecognisable from the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

Dioceses and congregations across the country have put in place swaths of child protection policies which are, for the most part, drilled into employees and religious alike. This is not unique to the Church, many of the changes are now in fact statutory requirements.

Again, dioceses and congregations have, in many cases, rebuilt from the ground up, their professional standards offices – the coal face where survivors and complaints very often have first contact with the Church.

What is the challenge and what is so hard to move is the culture.

This is the second and very important point.

As one of the witnesses in last month's wrap up hearing said 'culture eats for breakfast'.

And to this very point one of the people at the Catalyst for Renewal event I spoke at last Friday made this observation about institutions with strong dominating cultures, he said: 'when they want you to do the right thing they call on your integrity, when they want you to do the wrong thing, they call on your loyalty.'

This is the Catholic Church culture, and particularly its culture of clericalism.

I could go on programs like ABC News Breakfast and rattle off a long list of changes that have been made in the Church over the past years but that would ultimately serve no purpose.

While the changes to protocols and policies are vital these are the things that are base-line in all organisations that deal with children, not just the Church.

Where the rubber really hits the road, and this is a position shared by many Church leaders as well, is trying to change the attitudes and cultures within the Church, trying to push bureaucracies in Rome and administrators here to accept that the Church 'is not a law unto itself'.

The frustration I hear in the voices of reporters like Virginia Trioli mirrors the frustration I hear in the voice of many people in the Church, further abroad and which I share – it is the struggle to see concerted, consistent real change in the heart of the church, from Rome to parishes in the most remote parts of the world.

It is the Catholic community calling for a church that resembles what the Pope has called for, 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.