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OPINION

Act now against the criminals protected by the Catholic Church

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It is difficult to stop crying.

A child sexual abuse expert from the US, Bruce Perry, simply picked a random example. He spoke via video link to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; he was one of 36 experts in the field who gave evidence last week at the final public hearing of the royal commission, titled Case Study 57: Nature, Cause and Impact of Child Sexual Abuse. Perry's example was of "a little five-year-old child and somebody is raping you", and he talked of what it does to the young mind.

They were painful words to hear because that is what happened to our little five-year-old Emma and, not long after, to our six-year-old Katie. To hear what their infant minds had to deal with was crushing — a dreadful add-on to the vision of rape by the priest, which already haunts us.

It was like a knife to the heart.

That priest was Kevin O'Donnell; he was 66 years older than Emma; he was our parish priest, with access to the primary school and its 300 children where I, as a Catholic, sent our girls. He went to prison in 1995 for 14 months for sexually assaulting children (rape charges were dropped in a plea bargain). I believe that from 1958 until he was arrested, he sexually assaulted at least 100 children.

Memories haunted our girls. Emma took her life aged 26 after a traumatic teenage and young adult life filled with despair, self-harming and drug addiction. Katie began binge drinking and was hit by a car while drunk. She spent 12 months in hospital and now, 18 years later, still receives 24-hour care, as she always will. Childhood sexual abuse was the cause and self-destructive behaviour was the impact.

Four weeks before came Case Study 50, titled Catholic Church in Australia, a three-week hearing during which Australia's archbishops gave disturbing testimony.

In his evidence, on three occasions Hobart Archbishop Julian Porteous said the reason they did not act to stop child sexual abuse was because "nobody understood the seriousness of the effects of sexual abuse on children". This common, if absurd, excuse has been used by the hierarchy, both here and overseas, since 1994. In using it, they admit knowing about the crimes. And not stopping them. Crimes that attracted the death penalty until 1961.

Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge stated: "I have no right to go to a priest, who is not an employee of mine, and say, 'Excuse me, are you in a sexual relationship?' " What if that "sexual relationship" was with a child?

When, on a panel of five archbishops, one described the forced, often violent, rape of thousands of children as “misbehaving”, not one of them said a word. God almighty, what is wrong with these sanctimonious men of religion? What do they need to make them understand? Another \$450 million royal commission?

I once handed my most precious treasure, my three children, to the Catholic Church for their primary school education and at that school was the pedophile O’Donnell. The archbishop of Melbourne, Frank Little, knew about O’Donnell’s crimes by then. Evidence before the royal commission has told us that in 1986, the year before Emma started school, Little received a letter from a nun informing him that O’Donnell had sexually assaulted a boy over several years.

Little did nothing — an act of criminal neglect.

This was not the only time Little put his priests before the safety of Catholic children. In 1978 a magistrate and a barrister approached him about a boy in their parish who had been sexually assaulted by priest Bill Baker. The archbishop yelled at the two men to leave his office. But he acted: days later he transferred Baker to another parish, where his crimes were not known. As adults, some of his victims went to police. Baker was jailed for a few of his crimes and then lived on a generous church pension.

Further royal commission evidence shows the Catholic hierarchy was told in 1958 that O’Donnell was raping children. They did nothing and he raped others freely for another 34 years until retiring with an honorary title from the church.

Can today’s archbishops be trusted with the safety and lives of your children?

We don’t have to look far for the answer.

Last year some parents in Melbourne tried to remove from their parish a priest after newspapers reported that the church had made a \$75,000 payout to a victim of his sexual abuse. The royal commission has established that the maximum of \$75,000 is only awarded in the very worst cases. Tellingly, the church sided with the priest, who denied the abuse, against the parents. Eventually, he was transferred. His new parishioners complained. He was moved again. His present location is unknown.

We have lost count of how many victims of priests have taken their lives. Of course, the crimes devastate parents and grandparents of victims, siblings, spouses and children of victims, and loving friends. Emma’s closest friend, Lu, took her own life five months after Emma.

Where were the church hierarchy representatives at this final royal commission hearing? There was much they stood to learn about the damage their colleagues had done to the 4445 victims in their care. They might have better understood these blighted lives, perhaps even developed some empathy for them. But no. They stayed away. All of them.

They didn’t care then and they don’t care now.

My husband, Anthony, and I have attended 108 days of royal commission hearings and seen many other days of evidence via webcast. We are grateful to the royal commission for seeking truth and justice about these crimes. Without it, victims would still be fighting a losing battle against a powerful and once influential institution.

The royal commission will release its findings on December 15 but these will go nowhere unless politicians act on them. We hope they vote for the safety and protection of voiceless, innocent children and not cave in to the untrustworthy churches and their manipulative lawyers and lobbyists.

Implementing the recommendations will help make Australia the safest country in the world for children.

Who doesn't want that?

Chrissie Foster is the author of Hell on the Way to Heaven with Paul Kennedy.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/act-now-against-the-criminals-protected-by-the-catholic-church/news-story/39f9195ef5662d72120d87bcb280df34>