

Final Hearing and priests conference in Brisbane

Francis Sullivan 29 March 2017

The Royal Commission finished what has been a grueling and major part of its work over the past four years – its schedule of some 57 public investigations of institutions in which there was significant child sexual abuse and, significantly, a failure to respond appropriately.

As Justice McClellan said in his opening remarks during the final case study the Commission could have undertaken many more case studies were it not for the constraints of time and resources.

Despite this I think it is safe to say that the Commission has gone far and beyond what most people had expected of it when it started its work in early 2013.

While the final case study took a general approach to investigating the nature, cause and impact of child sexual abuse, not focusing on any one particular institution, the previous 56 investigations have revealed what have been horrific stories and massive failures of leadership and administration across many of Australia's biggest and most respected institutions.

When the Church was first examined in Case Study 4 in late 2013 – the first case study to look at the Catholic Church – we released what has become known as the Church's Commitment Statement.

In it, for the first time, Church leaders from around Australia admitted that there had been crimes and cover-ups; that leaders had moved offending priests, effectively allowing them to abuse children again; failed to report abused to the police and put the reputation of the Church ahead of the protection of children.

Over the past four years all this and more has been writ large within the Commission and throughout the media.

Here at the TJHC we have also tried to present the unvarnished facts of the hearings as they were revealed. We made a decision at the start of this process that we would not try to qualify, contextualise or minimise anything that was revealed.

We owed this to the survivors, alive and dead, and we owed it to the Catholic Community who, like so many others, were unaware of the breadth and depth of the abuse over many decades in our Church.

After more than four years of public hearings, 20 involving the Catholic Church either directly or indirectly, the Commissioners will now spend the next six months or so completing their final report.

The information they have gathered through the course of the Commission has identified more than 4,000 institutions where the abuse of children is alleged to have occurred.

The final report will be comprehensive and detailed, it will provide a road map for institutions like the Catholic Church to follow to ensure all children are safe and that survivors of child sexual abuse are treated with compassion, respect and fairness.

Some people both within the Church and beyond might think that the hard part is over. That is not true. The job of addressing the glaring problems within the Church – particularly the culture of clericalism which seems to be at the base of so much abuse – will be hard and it will need to be continuous.

And unless our Church leaders take a very active and public role in developing responses to the Commission's report and ensuring its recommendations are put in place then Catholics will continue to abandon the church and the broader community will continue to view it with distrust and skepticism.

As the work of the TJHC continues, this week I attended the Archdiocese of Brisbane's clergy convention. Building on issues emerging from the Commission's work, we talked about the importance of supervision and ongoing formation for priests, seminary training and culture, the complexities of living a celibate life, and challenges more generally for the priesthood such as professional and geographic isolation, conflicting loyalties and loss of personal status.

Issues emerging around power and authority were also discussed, including the relationship of priests and their bishop, clericalism, possible difficulties negotiating diocesan administration and risks to transparency and accountability.

There's a need to focus on discernment and the ability to listen with a humble heart, something that is difficult when a natural reaction to the Royal Commission might be defensiveness and a tendency to protect ideology.

Priests should be encouraged to take responsibility, to pursue best practice, to engage in supervision and ongoing formation, to be accountable to standards and to be more transparent.

Priests have an important role in empowering the local community and re-engaging the faithful, many of whom have lost faith in the church.