

SPEECH

Concerned Catholics Public Forum

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**Check against delivery

The Royal Commission has been like a freight train. Crashing through the confected edifice mounted by the institutional Church to limit its reputational damage caused from the clerical sexual abuse of children.

It has explored not only the history of clerical sexual abuse of children, but it has forensically examined the organisational culture that led to the cover ups, concealment and outright denial that abuse cases had even occurred.

There has been nowhere to hide for the Church. And neither should there have been.

There have been some within our ranks who have railed against what they perceive to be a bias against the Church.

They claim media reporting has been biased and there has been an over emphasis by the Commission on the Catholic Church.

They protest that child sexual abuse is far more an issue in families and in state government run and sponsored organisations.

They even suggest that the people who have come before the Commission have been urged to do so because it is easier to get money out of the Church than it is to fight the government departments for payments.

Frankly this completely misses the point.

Since it started the Commission has heard from 6,570 people.

They have reported abuse in non-government and government institutions.

Of those nearly two thirds of survivors reported abuse within a Catholic institution.

Data released by the Commission revealed that between 1980 and 2015, 4,440 people alleged child abuse by 1,880 alleged perpetrators in more than 1,000 separate Church institutions.

Therefore, the single largest institutional grouping that has been responsible for child sexual abuse in Australia is the Catholic Church.

And now it is up to us to firstly acknowledge that, and then to do something about it.

In the final hearing for the Catholic Church the Commission sought to explore why the abuse occurred and why it had been so dreadfully managed.

In brief, the culture of self-protection and self-preservation ingrained within the institutional Church is the culprit.

This culture is nurtured and prevails due to those in positions of power – or those wishing to be – controlling who make decisions, how information is communicated, or not, and how accountabilities are deployed, or not.

For everyday Catholics the clerical sexual abuse scandal has been hypocrisy writ large.

The lives of innocent children, the pastoral care of their families and the trust of parishioners have all been sacrificed in the interests of the institution.

In other words, the misuse of power and position have led to decades of deceit, secrecy and concealment.

Even worse the hearings revealed that the experience of those abused is best summed up as being one of fear, rejection and suppression.

This is because the might of the Church has intimidated and risk managed those who have been damaged.

It shows how the self-interested culture of the Church works in practice.

Even today the workings of the Church are slow, cautious, risk adverse and bureaucratic.

All supposedly in the best interests of the organisation but all too often as a response to what Church officials perceive as a threat to the institution.

The Commission has examined case after case where local bishops and religious leaders did not appropriately consult experts in handling the abuse cases.

They did not properly document meetings and report cases to the police.

They did not involve competent colleagues and parishioners in managing perpetrators or in putting in place safeguards, protective measures and prevention programs.

All the prevention steps have only come in the last 20 or so years.

The Commission also heard about the pernicious effects of clericalism and the wielding of power through a clerical caste.

In other words, a deliberate elitist approach by some clergy to exclude others from positions of privilege.

And with that came a propensity to hush things up, to not rock the boat and certainly not to break the unwritten but well understood code of not dobbing on your mates.

Again the misguided sense of entitlement and self-interest by some fuelled a system of self-perpetuation, defensiveness and exclusion.

This is every bit an unhealthy culture.

It is also one of co-dependency.

Clericalism doesn't survive unless everyone in the system plays by the rules.

Lay people also have much soul searching to do.
We have been far too passive and accepting.

We placed clerics on pedestals and were happy to leave them there.

Most Catholic lay people are very competent in their daily lives but somehow either expect less of themselves in their Church life or assume that their competencies and participation can only ever be utilised in limited and controlled ways.

These days need to come to an end.

And while in the final hearing into the Catholic Church we heard many of the senior church leaders decry the effects of clericalism, to rid the Church of it continues to be one of our most significant challenges.

The sex abuse scandal has become a weeping wound for the Church.

It is self-inflicted and as such requires self-recovery.

The experience of the abused now becomes the teacher, even the healer, for the Church.

Is this not what we believe? That suffering is redemptive and transformative?

In other words, the suffering of those damaged by the Church is the very source of renewal and change for the Church.

Our challenge is to open ourselves to this reality as people of faith.

The Gospel tells us that fear, rejection, abandonment and suppression can and should be transformed.

Healing happens when dignity is restored within a culture built on faithful accompaniment and radical inclusion.

It has taken extraordinary attitudinal changes within dioceses and religious orders to relate to victims in a respectful, mutual and non-defensive manner.

This has come about through strong victim advocates and from Church leaders recognising the failures of the past, opening themselves to broader advice, particularly from lay people and being willing to do things differently.

At least these days, some Church authorities are prepared to drop aggressive legal tactics, revisit past monetary settlements and begin to publicly acknowledge their administrative failures.

This same inclusive approach is now required across the pastoral life of the Church in general.

For too long the declining numbers in the pews have been tolerated by authorities and often misinterpreted as being disaffection when more likely it is disenchantment.

The anger so many Catholics have felt about the sex abuse scandal has compounded the grief and loss the faithful have experienced over decades.

This has had an accumulative and corrosive effect on allegiance to and identification with the Church. It erodes our morale about the goodness of what we are associated with, and for some, working for.

The cries for renewal and change have been resisted out of a fear of disruption. It is the same resistance victims of abuse encountered when they confronted authorities.

The irony will be an ever diminishing Church, irrelevant and ideological, not even conservative!

Within this context the Church of tomorrow requires all Catholics to adopt a sense of corporate responsibility about the way the Church will express and organise itself.

We are all equal under God and through baptism share the same responsibility to build our Church.

From the very outset this means adopting a non-ideological disposition. We cannot let this be cast as or even dissolve into another set of 'culture wars' in the Church.

There is no time to retreat into identity politics and conservative versus liberal camps. Neither is it helpful to pitch Church leaders against the rest.

The truth is, this is not just a leadership issue.

It is our issue.

Our leaders need to be responsive and open.

We need to be discerning and open.

Our leaders need to let go of what is not working, we need to embrace change that can work.

Our leaders need to seek a Church that is relevant, we need to respond to the call of faith.

Our leaders need to step up and we need to stand with them shoulder to shoulder.

Most importantly, we need to be a listening Church.

These are dangerous times for our Church.

Many have left already.

Among those who stay there will be calls in some quarters to 'just settle down and regroup'.

Others will try and rally the troops to 'show that the Church is far more than the evils revealed at the Royal Commission'.

Even others will want to circle the wagons and 'wait for better days'.

None of this will work.

Any genuine healing for our Church requires open dialogue and recognition of the pain experienced at all levels within the faithful, both those present and those who have drifted or run away.

We need to have the courage to discuss what has for too long been kept off the table.

We need to embrace pain and discomfort as the opportunity for healing and growth.

And having the courage to live with uncertainty, even silence, as new ways, directions emerge will be essential.

This is not a new call.

The very fact that it is not a new call is telling in itself.

That said, our time to be imaginative and open to the promptings of the Spirit has well and truly arrived.

Let us take up the challenge of Pope Francis and be a Church that is engaged, inclusive and messy.

A Church that listens before speaking, understands before judging and seeks to be relevant rather than set apart.

ENDS

The Truth Justice and Healing Council was established by Church leaders to engage with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse on behalf of the Catholic Church in Australia

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