

Opening comments at parish meeting with TJHC

Brian Norman, member of the Solidarity Group of Frenchs Forest Catholic Parish

We gather here, drawn by a need to stand in solidarity together against abuse, to lament the terrible betrayals of the past and present.

We know that many of those betrayals were by people with the name of their God on their lips. Our hearts are heavy with anger, grief and pain for those who have suffered.

We stand with those who have experienced abuse in all its pernicious forms and we share their tears and hold them in our love as we face the future together.

We acknowledge that we are on the land of the traditional owners of this country, the Cannaigal People of the Cameraigal Clan. As we pay our respect to Elders, past and present, and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders across Australia, we acknowledge that many of their children and young people have been abused by those who pretended to care for them.

We have been drawn together because of our concern for those who have been abused by clergy, religious and lay-leaders in our Church. Our sense of betrayal has been compounded because the institution of which we are part and in which we trusted, failed to protect our children and vulnerable members, failed to deal with perpetrators and, so often, subjected victims, survivors and their families to further harm as a means of stifling public scrutiny.

I acknowledge those clergy who are present here with us this evening. I acknowledge the support of Fr Jose Philip, Parish Priest of Frenchs Forest Parish and the Pastoral Team for their support of this event. Tonight, we gather together in a spirit of respectful and humble sharing as we question how the abuse could have happened and how we can guard against it in the future.

Tonight's event is sponsored by the Solidarity Group of Frenchs Forest Catholic Parish. I'm a member of the Solidarity Group and my name is Brian Norman. Our group was formed in 2011, after unfinished business, relating to abuses during the 80s and 90s at our Church at Terrey Hills erupted dramatically at Mass one Sunday morning. This event also re-opened unfinished business relating to abuses of young people here at Forestville. As the name implies, the Solidarity Group is committed to ensuring that we continue to try to listen to, and show our solidarity with those who have been abused.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Abuse has brought to light many of the perpetrators of abuse and, importantly for us, the culture of cover-up of the Catholic Church hierarchy, thereby allowing offenders to prosper in their wrong actions.

For many Catholics, the revelations about our Church have opened our eyes to a structure which has been more preoccupied with maintaining its own power at all costs than being the heart of the compassionate Christ. Many Catholics have simply abandoned the Church, this body, which had been the source of their faith and their hope, this community in which they had shared communion, seems no longer relevant in their eyes.

We, the present day Catholics, see the seats emptying, with few young people to renew us and fewer locals attracted to the idea of priesthood as we know it. Some are hoping that the fuss will die down so that we can get back to business as usual. This won't happen. Just as, 500 years ago this year, it took the Reformation, under Martin Luther to shake up many of the institutions within the Catholic Church, so now, a different form of reformation, a reformation from within, is needed urgently, to bring First Century Gospel values to a Twenty First Century world.

The Spirit of God is active, even in times of calamity. The Spirit quietly encourages us to grasp the message of the cross and the resurrection to meet the needs of the world about us, not to build fortresses of self-protection. This is not easy, especially for an institution like the Catholic Church but it is no longer an option.

Times of crisis are also times of opportunity. Together, both laity and clergy, women and men, we must rebuild and rebuild quickly. Tonight, we are privileged to welcome Francis Sullivan CEO of the Church's Truth, Justice and Healing Council, who has listened to the survivors of the abuse and their families as well as the cover-ups on a daily basis for the past four years. He has come to share his invaluable insights with us.

Brian Norman

Member of the Solidarity Group of Frenchs Forest Catholic Parish

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