

Fr Peter Sherman

Parish Priest, Ballarat East

Presentation given to community gathering at Emmaus Catholic Primary School, Ballarat



2 November 2017

I feel overwhelmed with all this, by the complexity and also the implications of the sexual abuse issue in our church, in institutions and in families and in the face of the enormity of how sexual abuse has affected individuals and communities. It's not hard for me to feel helpless, to feel some sort of paralysis in a sense. I also know that I can't change what's happened.

But I also know that as a baptised Christian and a community leader, I can do some things, as small or insignificant as it may be. Three things firstly. I believe that the sexual abuse happened. Secondly, that for many reasons, bishops and superiors failed to recognise the seriousness of the sexual abuse issue and to address the issue in the church. And I believe that victims have a right to justice.

So I ask, what can I do to rebuild trust for our faith filled communities? Well, I can listen to the stories of the victims and the families with deep compassion. I can inform myself about the issue of sexual abuse in society and also to try to understand in some shape or form the pathology of the offenders. I go beyond the media for my information and my commentary to ensure that I'm well informed.

I do all I can to ensure that children are safe in our parish communities including compliance with civil and church law and the protocols including *Integrity in Ministry*, the *Code of Conduct for Caring for Children*, the duty that is mine and all adults' to report information about child sexual abuse to police as this applies to me, to our employees and to our volunteers. Our purpose is to create a culture of protection and care and I want to affirm those in our teaching community and in our parish who assist me in all of that.

And at parish masses I will address the issue of sexual abuse when appropriate, speaking of the issue which enables the community to know "that I know that you know and you know that I know" and hopefully this opens up pathways for greater communication.

We regularly include prayers for victims and survivors, for families and also for our church. I hope that the words that I speak would encourage parishioners to be progressive believers, that they operate out of an adult faith perspective. I hope that I would encourage parishioners to embrace change, to take them forward and to not to be looking back to what we thought were the good old days.

I hope that my words in some way would seem to lift the burden of guilt that many Catholics carry about this issue of sexual abuse that leads to fear rather than healing. In our parish we offer opportunities for communal celebrations of reconciliation in particular.

I had a wonderful experience recently of offering a little survey around how people felt about the issue of the seal of the confession. Around 180 parishioners responded. There was a very strong response from parishioners who said there should be change. While understanding of the issue and reasons varied, what came through very, very clearly from both opinions was how important it was that whatever happened, children in our parish should be safe.

I endeavour to support and progress the Loud Fence and No More Silence movement that's had its beginnings in our parish and I'm very proud of that. And I hope and I pray that the leaders of our church

will be prophetic enough to hear the voice of the church, especially the voice of the laity and seek genuine consultation in the church.

The Australian Catholic Bishops have convened a Plenary Council of the entire Church in Australia to be held in 2020. A Plenary Council can discuss and legislate on a wide variety of issues including matters of faith, morals and discipline and also consider the critical issues of our time. Watch this space.

If I want to see change within the church, then I know that I also need to have change within myself. A change of mind and heart. And this asks of me to continually return to the grand tradition of the person and the story of Jesus Christ. My faith is not in the church. My faith is in Jesus Christ. This relationship I must nurture above all, this is what gives me hope and sustains my faith.

To finish I'd just like to share with you an "Ode to the Church". You may have heard it before. It was written by Carlo Carretto. Somebody described Carlo as one of the greatest spiritual writers that you may have never heard of. He was a great Catholic social activist and contemplative who struggled with his love/hate relationship with his church and he expressed it as thus.

Ode to the Church by Carlo Carretto

How much I must criticize you, my church, and yet how much I love you!

You have made me suffer more than anyone and yet I owe more to you than to anyone. I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence.

You have given me much scandal and yet you alone have made me understand holiness. Never in this world have I seen anything more compromised, more false, and yet I have never touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful.

Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your sure arms! No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you.

Then to where would I go? To build another church?

But I could not build one without the same defects, for they are my defects. And again, if I were to build another church, it would be my church, not Christ's church. No, I am old enough to know better!

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The Truth Justice and Healing Council is coordinating the Catholic Church's response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.