

Speech Notes for Newman College Council Dinner
20 April 2016

Earlier this month the Royal Commission into the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse announced that it had held just over 5000 private sessions. In these sessions up to 1700 different institutions have been named as places in which children were abused.

The Commission has indicated that over 1000 of these institutions were operated by faith based organisations. Of those, just over 700 were conducted by the Catholic Church.

In other words, for every three abuse stories told to the Commission, one involves the Catholic Church.

On these figures, the Catholic Church is the single largest institutional grouping where child sexual abuse occurs in Australia.

This explains to some degree why the Commission has held around 30 percent of its public hearings on the Catholic Church.

To some degree this reflects the dominant institutional presence of the Church in schools, orphanages, boarding houses and hostels. It may well also reflect the high profile of the Church in media reporting on abuse cases over the decades.

However, contextualizing may have its place but it is not an excuse for the degree of abuse that has occurred.

Neither can it be a defense against the public attention and scrutiny now on the Church.

I know there are voices, both within the Church and beyond, who are alarmed at what they see as a bias on behalf of the Commission that we are not being treated fairly.

They say that there is too much emphasis on the Church and not enough attention being given to government agencies and other institutions.

There are also some who say that this is all a beat up by ideological enemies of the Church who use media outlets to weaken the Church's influence and impact in society.

Unfortunately, our own statistics, and the volume of stories going into the Commission simply indicate that we are in the news, because we make the news!

One of the hardest facts to face is the degree of public outrage that exists against the Church today, even where the abuse scandal is predominantly an historical matter.

Our Council had professional market surveying conducted at the start of the Royal Commission. Catholics, practicing or not, and the general public were canvassed.

The results revealed a very bleak picture. Overwhelmingly people do not trust the Church leadership when it talks about child abuse.

In other words, the obfuscation, secrecy and deceit that has characterized the handling of the scandal has spawned a distrust of bishops, religious leaders and Church officials.

The Royal Commission's hearings are only reaffirming the gross failures of past administrations and particular individuals. The particular internal Church processes and codes of behavior are being exposed and the overriding

impression is of an institution hyper sensitive to protecting its image at all costs.

In almost all of the public hearings Church officials have been criticized for their handling of abuse cases, for failing to inform authorities and for disbelieving victims.

The picture painted was of a Church that acted more like any other institution that was approaching cases of sex abuse from a risk management stance and where the assets of the Church need to be protected with more vigilance and resolve than the pastoral needs of those abused.

Sadly, because of this the lack of trust found in our research is being transferred to the current leaders, even where they have no 'fingerprints' on the past.

Where leaders are being listened to, is when take positive measures to assist victims, to address the culture of secrecy and cover up and put the interests of survivors well ahead of those of the institutional Church.

This period for the Catholic Church and we who identify with it is nothing if not grueling.

Amongst other reasons, there has been a considerable amount done by bishops and religious leaders in the past twenty years to address the scandal and put in place preventative measures.

The Australian church was at the forefront of pastorally oriented complaints handling procedures called Towards Healing. This was a seismic shift from the ultra defensive legally driven approach previously adopted before the 1990s.

Tragically, even the Towards Healing processes have been found wanting in the Commission hearings.

But on a bright note the hearings have demonstrated that the Catholic Church is almost a stand alone in offering victims a system of redress and reparation. So many other institutions, including other churches, have offered little to nothing to victims.

Some within the Church would like more emphasis to be given to the efforts that have been made to address the mishandling of the past. In other words to have a shift of emphasis from the Church's failures to its benefits for and contribution to the community.

This is fine if and when the primary purpose of the Royal Commission has been met. That purpose was articulated by the Commission chair, Justice Peter McClellan, in his opening address. Amongst other things he said the commission was an opportunity for the community to bear witness to what has happened.

We see this as being the opportunity for those who have been abused by the Church, damaged and left to suffer, to have the space and support to tell their stories.

Experts advise that it is extremely difficult to reveal a history of abuse. Only one in six adults ever reveal their childhood abuse. So the circumstances need to be conducive to enable people to tell their story.

Given the Church has spent such a considerable amount of time and resources keeping the stories of abuse silent this is no time for it to be filling the space with its explanations and justifications, let alone promoting its achievements at this time.

The might of the Church cannot once again be used to drown out the fragile voices of the abused.

I recognize that this places the Church in a vulnerable position. In a strange way the Church is now a victim of the process. The irony is obvious but in a very direct way this reflects our Pope's call for the Church to be a 'poor Church of the poor'.

The Royal Commission has indicated that it will hold a final public hearing to focus on the 'why question' and the Catholic Church. We anticipate this to be in February 2017.

In other words the Commission will explore why the abuse scandal occurred within the Church. Was there anything in particular about the Catholic Church and its culture that led to the volume of abuse and how it was handled.

There is already plenty of literature on this topic. The type of issues raised range from:

- Clericalism and the misuse of power;
- Secrecy and silence and codes of compliance ;
- Lack of accountability and transparency measures;
- How individuals dealt with celibacy and religious life;
- Training of seminarians and the formation of religious.

This will be a very threatening process for the Church. It risks dividing Catholics and further undermining the Church's standing in the community. But it is a necessary component of getting to the truth and demonstrating what the bishops and leaders said at the very start of the Commission:

That is, that they were committed to fully co-operating with the Commission.

To that end it is important to acknowledge that the Catholic Church has co-operated fully with every request for files, information and materials from the Commission.

In a world first Church leaders have provided the Commission with all their details on sex abuse cases. In no other part of the world has the Church been so co-operative.

This is a tangible sign that the current leadership really wants to put itself at the scrutiny of this inquiry and in turn demonstrate to the community that it means what it says when it claims that it will do whatever it takes to correct the damage of the past.

Leaders are currently assessing new ways to hold their management of safeguarding to account. They are exploring fairer measures in the litigation process and they are fully supportive of an independent system of redress for victims.

These are real advances in very difficult days.

I believe they are real signs of leadership.

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