

On the path to reconciliation, forgiveness and acceptance

By Francis Sullivan



THE Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is crucial.

People who have been damaged and fallen prey to offenders deserve the opportunity to tell their stories and for justice to be done. The Australian community, kept for too long in the dark, needs to hear how the Church has handled and mishandled child sex abuse cases. This is a devastating period in our history and only when the truth comes out can sustainable healing get underway.

The first tentative steps along this path have already started. Private hearings are being conducted across the country to enable people to tell their stories of abuse and tragedy. The commission assures us that proper support services will be available to those who come forward. It is vital that these sessions don't become occasions whereby people are traumatised again and left to cope once more in isolation and despair.

The Catholic Church leadership has fully embraced the Royal Commission and has already lifted confidentiality clauses to remove any barriers for those who wish to provide

information to the commission. This is but one action yet it demonstrates the Church's intention to comprehensively co-operate with the Commission.

For months now media reports of clerical sexual abuse have seeped into the community's psyche. The Church's history is embarrassing and shameful. At the same time its efforts since the early 1990s have seen a much more professional and robust system put in place to deal with allegations and provide redress for those damaged. While we recognise that the present attention is concentrated on the tragedies of the last half of the 20th century, the Church's story of professionalism will be told. It has already been independently recognised by Justice Antony Whitlam in his inquiry into a clerical abuse matter that spanned the management processes in the Armidale and Parramatta dioceses. In short, Justice Whitlam indicated that, sadly, had the current procedures for reporting child abuse laid down by the Church's *Towards Healing* protocols been in place back in the 1980s, then the tragedies perpetrated by the priest could have been averted.

This stark reality is very hard for the families of the priest's victims. It is damning of Church administration at the time. It also indicates how far along the path



the Church has come in the professional handling of allegations, reporting to authorities and managing clerical movements.

But that is at the tail end of the history of clerical sex abuse. Already in the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Institutions, the heads of religious congregations and local bishops have admitted gross mishandling of past cases that led to devastating results. These admissions were given freely and humbly. There's no point in being defensive or overly legalistic. The truth needs to be revealed, people damaged and the community generally need to be

healed of this very dark chapter in our history.

Our embrace of the Royal Commission will require a frank and open approach. We need to be prepared to face the failures and incompetencies of the past. The times when better judgment eluded decision makers. Only then can we demonstrate the

changes that have been put in place, the child protection policies that now govern administration and the systemic procedures that screen personnel and place safeguards within service agencies.

It is this awareness and sense of the need to atone that led the NSW Bishops to release *Sowing in Tears* this past Lent. Striking in its pastoral voice, as opposed to the overly legalistic tone that has characterised much of the public discourse, the Lenten letter shreds any intimation of defensiveness. In many ways it is a precursor to the necessary process through which the Church will undertake with the Royal Commission. It is a process that is both open and professional.

And it is for that very journey that the Truth, Justice and Healing Council has been established.

Immediately after the announcement of the Royal Commission, the Church leaders, bishops and congregational leaders alike, established the council.

Such quick and decisive action speaks volumes for their desire to let the truth come out and to face it openly and honestly.

The council will manage the legal representation for the entire Church throughout the commission's hearings. It will also speak for the Church in matters related to the commission. Even more importantly, the council will research into the best practice procedures, policies and structures that need to be in place to protect children, prevent sex abuse and give confidence to a community that in some quarters has run out of patience.

Our sincere hope and driving ambition is to find imaginative ways to reconcile with the people damaged, to build bridges with those estranged from the Church because of the scandals and to help reinvigorate the life of the Church as a place of healing, forgiveness and acceptance such that people feel they belong, not set apart.

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