

The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations concluded in Melbourne this week. Under intense scrutiny Cardinal George Pell and the Archbishop of Melbourne Denis Hart made it very clear that the Church has been involved in cover-ups and mishandling of child sex abuse in the past.

It is incumbent on the Church to be open and honest about this history. This is the only way that the community can trust that the Church will fully embrace these inquiries, including the Royal Commission, fairly and justly.

There is no doubt that this history of child sex abuse is embarrassing and shameful. There is no doubt that people still remain damaged from this history. It is a terrible sin for the Church and one that does require, not only honesty and openness, but atonement.

The Council has been established for this very purpose. The signals sent by the Cardinal and the Archbishop, at the Inquiry, are consistent with the decisions of the Church leadership. We must face our history and humbly accept the massive failings and the betrayal of individuals. We must sincerely listen to what has really happened to people that have been damaged. We need to genuinely care how their lives have been affected and what reparations are still needed.

We need to deeply understand that words, are just words. Even when Church leaders give heartfelt apologies, people remained damaged. The process of healing is not kick-started merely by words; rather it commences with a mutual spirit to connect with each other, to journey the difficult path of reconciliation together.

The challenge for us, as a Church, is to continually send the right signals to the people that have been damaged; that we believe their stories; that we respect the fact they are justifiably angry and disillusioned with the Church; that we genuinely want them to be living lives of dignity and purpose, not merely existences bedeviled by pain and isolation.

It is our hope that the Royal Commission process will go some way to alleviating this burden for people who have been damaged and for the wrongs the Church has been involved with. However, as a Church community we can't wait for the Royal Commission to do its work, we have to do our own.

Francis Sullivan