

## Not such a gentle silence

I read a quote from Russian playwright, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, recently that struck a cord: "*When the truth is replaced by silence, the silence is a lie*".

One of the sinister characteristics of sex abuse is that it is shrouded by an atmosphere of silence. When the sex abuse involves clergy or religious the silence is deafening; it becomes increasingly more uncomfortable to talk about and painful to listen to.

As a Church, we need to become a beacon of truthfulness and honesty, lighting the pathway towards justice and healing. There is no point huddling in a corner and hoping that this dark history in the Church passes quickly. It won't. The Royal Commission will reveal massive, and at times deliberate, denials of the extent of child abuse within the Church. Together, as a Church community, we need to own this issue, expose our scars and support and talk with one another. It is only then that true healing for people who have been damaged will begin.

During the week I met with the Bishop of Bunbury, Gerard Holohan, and the priests from the dioceses. It was clear from our discussions that priests, as the pastors of the community, want to break this silence too and discuss child sex abuse with parishioners. They want to give ordinary Catholics the opportunity to share their thoughts and feeling and perhaps their disillusionment.

Our meeting was also a great opportunity for the Priests to talk and share their personal challenges of ministering while child sex abuse plagues the Church. While I know their hurt does no compare with the victims of child abuse, Parish Priests are vulnerable to a lot of innuendo and misinformation and they take a lot of unwarranted criticism. As a Church we need to provide ways to support them, because it is hard to be a healer when you are hurting yourself.

In our discussions we also talked about the importance of Catholics knowing and understanding the Church's current policies and responses to child sex abuse. The process can be intimidating and confusing and feed into the disillusionment people have with the Church. With information Catholics have a platform to discuss their feelings, contribute to the Church's response and be engaged in the healing process.

*Towards Healing* was introduced in 1996 and was a pastoral response by the Church to provide healing to victims. It was a landmark, national embrace by the Church and filled a big hole in the way the administration had dealt with the victims of child sex abuse. There is no doubt there is room for improvement, but *Towards Healing* is a solid foundation to assist those that have been damaged.

The Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) will shortly begin a process of examining all the Church processes and procedures, including *Towards Healing*. The Royal Commission will also make recommendations about what are best practices and processes.

Catholics throughout Australia have been dismayed by the sad and tragic stories of sex abuse in the Church.

Our silence has been too loud. It is now time to talk, to learn and to understand the Church's position and response to child abuse and together work towards healing all who have been damaged.

I would be interested in hearing your views on how we can create opportunities for Catholics to share their thoughts and feelings about the issues the Church now faces.

You can do this by sending a message through:

<http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/contact.aspx>

or posting a comment on our facebook site:

<https://www.facebook.com/TruthJusticeAndHealingCouncil>

**Francis Sullivan**