

## **The Royal Commission - drawing a line in the sand**

Even in these very early days of the Royal Commission there have been some encouraging and positive developments for victims and the many people damaged by child sex abuse. There is still a long, long way to go, but it is a promising start.

Every aspect of how the Catholic Church managed or mismanaged child sex abuse is being thoroughly scrutinized and investigated. The Royal Commission will illuminate our history, but will also provide a platform for the Church to say 'sorry' and to reach out to victims with genuine concern, kindness and importantly action. It is a time for change; it is a time for renewal; and the time to ensure everyone, especially those who have been damaged, that it will never happen again.

Last week, Dr Cathy Kezelman, from Adults Surviving Child Abuse (ASCA), said the Royal Commission had helped break down the taboo of child sex abuse and made survivors realize they are not alone. There has been a 300 per cent increase in calls to their helpline since the Royal Commission was announced.

While recognizing the courage it takes for survivors to come forward and tell their story, we really encourage them to do so. This is a time when the community is very focused on child sex abuse issues and we want politicians and lawmakers to respond. There is a real need for regulatory and administrative changes so that we have a consistent approach across the country to ensure a just outcomes for victims.

The Royal Commission seems to have opened the floodgates, allowing people to be open and honest about child sex abuse. In the speech I made to the St Thomas More Forum in Canberra last week I spoke about what was needed to assist those who have been damaged.

"We need to put in place better systems, processes, redress and contrition that says, in one way or another – you are damaged, we believe you, we are sorry, we want to help you heal and we are working to try to make sure that what you went through never happens again.

Once, raising these issues may have seemed somehow disloyal, now people feel free to speak their truth to people who are open to listen. It is only when the truth is told that sustainable healing can begin.

As well as opening the channels of communication, the Royal Commission is also committed to developing recommendations about best practice policies and procedures when dealing with children and young people. Last week the Royal Commission released the first of six working papers on issues central to the work of the Commission.

The first paper is 'Working with Children Check'. The Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) is currently drafting the submission to ensure a strong, consistent, national voice

from the Church on this process. The TJHC will distribute the draft submission on 2 July for comment by 15 July.

During the week I also spoke with many school Principals and Priests from the Diocese of Broken Bay. They, like so many others, are committed to the Royal Commission. Together we spoke about the importance of these leaders, at a local level acknowledging the past and working for a better future. Again, the Royal Commission is creating opportunities for ordinary Catholics to candidly discuss the 'wrongs' of the Church with their Parish Priests and talk about their anger, hurt and confusion.

The Royal Commission is drawing a line in the sand and the Church itself must respond humbly and with dignity, grace and enthusiasm and show victims, by our actions, we do care and we won't let it happen again.

**Francis Sullivan**