

TRANSCRIPT

Interview: Mornings: 666 ABC Radio Canberra
Francis Sullivan, CEO Truth Justice Healing Council

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Genevieve Jacobs:

The Clerical abuse scandal that's gripped the churches – the abuse scandal in churches and other institutions over the past few years – has run deep and dark. And it's exposed much more than the terrible damage done to the victims. It's also shown up patterns of concealment, of entitlement, of a misplaced belief that crimes can be swept under the carpet – judgements that will now be explored thoroughly in the Royal Commission into sexual abuse in institutions. And of course the Victorian inquiry is already underway.

Francis Sullivan was appointed head of the Catholic Church's Truth Justice and Healing Council a few months ago. A few days ago, here in Canberra, speaking at the St Thomas More Forum in Campbell, he was fairly vigorously outspoken on the way the church has approached the problems thus far and I thought it was an opportune moment to get him into the studio after that first public speech.

Francis, hello to you.

Francis Sullivan:

Hello Genevieve.

Jacobs:

Now this was quite strong stuff on your part. If I could quote from what you told the gathering, the Church gathering a few days ago, you said it's a dark period in the Church's history, that people had fallen prey (that was your phrase) to prejudice. You said that we have to examine a culture which has allowed secrecy and silence, intimidation, legalism, obfuscation, to allow sexual abuse to happen. How ready is the church hierarchy to admit just how much wrongdoing and how much blame there is in this whole hideous business?

Sullivan:

Well firstly I certainly did say all that, and, ah, like many practicing Catholics, people who identify as Catholic, um, our history in this area has been very confronting and shameful and I think we all want to get this brought out in the open so that people who have been damaged can get healing and justice. That's really the most important point. The Royal Commission is about people's attitude. It's certainly about institutions like the Catholic Church coming forward and taking responsibility.

So the hard part about this is that the Church leadership – whether they are bishops or religious leaders – to a person have said they want to cooperate fully with the Royal Commission and they've commissioned our Council to coordinate and speak for it at this time.

Jacobs:

Francis you're a layman though. I've heard what you've just said from many other lay Catholics – from those in the pews – that they feel a great sense of shame an enormous obligation to try to remediate to get this done. Do we hear that same personal sense of shame from senior

churchmen? Cardinal Pell, Archbishop Denis Hart. There is a strong sense that they've been less willing to admit that great wrongs have been done and that they've been covered up.

Sullivan: I don't think that's fair. I think that the leadership, whether it's the Cardinal, or the archbishops or local bishops, have expressed many times, apologies and taken responsibility for the past. I think the problem actually, in the community is that actions speak louder than words and ah, like anything in life you can apologise, but people who are damaged remain damaged. It's a process of healing. It doesn't happen in a moment – it doesn't happen with an expression. What the Church needs to do is to demonstrate its bonafides throughout the Royal Commission and beyond, so that people who have been damaged will get justice and get to embark on a process of healing.

Jacobs: As the CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council, was there communication from you that the church had perhaps got it wrong with previous approaches – Towards Healing, the Melbourne approach developed in part by now Cardinal George Pell? Was there an admission that those processes were flawed or inadequate?

Sullivan: No. What we're saying is that there are in a sense, two clumps of the past. In the 60s 70s and 80s the atrocities were mishandled. Archbishop Hart even said in Victoria, there was a culture of secrecy and cover-up. You know, that's a real positive thing to have said from a senior person. Equally in the early 90s, um, the Towards Healing process began. This was a first around the world, certainly for the church, along with what they call the Melbourne Response. These were deliberate attempts to try and pastorally heal the issues for people who didn't want to use the legal process.

Jacobs: But were they not sometimes used to prevent people from using the legal processes. Was there not a suggestion on the church's part: 'we will deal with this between ourselves, there's no need for you to go to the law over these things'.

Sullivan: That has been a criticism out there, and I think the Church needs to tell its story about that. And that's partly what the Royal Commission's about – explaining what these processes and policies are about. I'm of the view that the policies were about a pastoral response. They weren't about trying to give people a poor deal. But I have heard those criticisms and we need to tell our story. Because most Catholics have no idea what Towards Healing is about, or if you're in Melbourne, what the Melbourne Response is all about. Having said that though Genevieve, this Royal Commission is looking for best practice. It's incumbent on us then to re-look at those programs and those policies in the light of what will be best practice. And to listen to the criticisms, not to stone-wall the criticisms, but listen to them, because at the end of the day, the Church needs to demonstrate that our heart has been broken here.

Jacobs: You spoke in your speech about understanding the damage to victims, what that constitutes. Tell me what you now understand about the extent of that damage.

Sullivan: Well to be perfectly frank, before I took on this job I didn't understand anything. And, ah, I did have, I've had many experiences now sitting with people who have been victims. And you know, as I've I said to other people and even today, I'm usually not lost for words, but I usually am on those occasions. It's pretty devastating to listen to what's happened to a person. You know, people my age, 50-somethings and it is very hard to take on board how a life gets destroyed.

Jacobs: And I think the lasting impact of that, the way that that unfolds through physical and mental health issues through all kinds of things – employment, relationships, that then goes on to stability, numbers and things cascade the initial damage, don't they.

Sullivan: Yes, and you know, where I come from as being a person in the Church, you've got to be with people. The church should travel with people, not be apart from them. And I think that people will say, people who have been victims, that the process ostracises them, isolates them, and they even feel guilty.

Jacobs: Having been abused?

Sullivan: I know, I know. It gob smacks you to think about that. But what really concerns me is that it always looks like it's the church is at odds with those damaged and that's not what it's about. So part of this whole process and understanding the scope of it is that the church needs to walk with people side-by-side, not as opposed.

Jacobs: You also called for a full accounting of the numbers of offenders and victims. Now again, it would be easy to suggest that many in the Church have been keen to dodge this. That they suggested that these are historical crimes, that it's impossible to really gauge their extent. What do you think those numbers would show us.

Sullivan: Well I hope they show a perspective that a majority of people who are working in the – the far, far, far majority of people who work in the Church, the religious and clergy are fine people, um, dedicated to their church and to the community and that the incidences of child sex abuse are relatively small. The allegations, um, the number of allegations is higher than the number of perpetrators. That's the nature of ah, of paedophilia. But what I really think this shows is that across all institutions whether they're government or other churches, or non-government organisations, that the general rate is probably similar. I don't know that, but that's one of the things we're looking for is the incidence and the rate there-of.

Jacobs: My guest here in the studio is Francis Sullivan who has been recently appointed head of the Truth Justice and Healing Council. A Canberran himself. You're with me, Genevieve Jacobs, here on 666 ABC Canberra. Francis what's the Council's role now that the Royal Commission has begun.

Sullivan: Yes well, a number of things. But firstly to help the Royal Commission interface back in the Catholic Church. There's 189 religious orders. There's over 30 diocese. Inside all those structures there are institutions, schools, orphanages, whatever. This Royal Commission is about institutions, so for them to relate to the Catholic Church they need a place. We are THE place.

Secondly we are helping organise the legal representation, making sure that the documents the Royal Commission wants are delivered on time, in full. Making sure that when it comes time for submissions or for witnesses, they are there, that's the first job. The second job is to advise back into the church leadership about the policies and procedures and how they will need to be modified or changed in order to meet best-practice. And thirdly to advise, again internally, about, what about our culture needs to be checked in order that we don't see any of this type of abuse again.

Jacobs: Is it your role to reshape the image to re-sell a church that, as you've just suggested, has very big business interests in this country. Is the Royal Commission also partly a process of redeeming the church's credibility?

Sullivan: Well, it's not my role to re-shape the Church's image. It's my role to be a spokesperson for the Council during this time and to hopefully speak from the heart of what is the church. That's the first point like I said. I think the community needs to know that the Church has broken its heart here and they need to see that we are feeling this deeply.

Jacobs: But this is a real difficulty for the church, isn't it. The hospital beds and the school rooms are full to bursting. The focus on the church's spiritual foundations and engagement with that has gradually eroded. The very real risk for the Australian Catholic Church throughout this scandal is that it remains a social institution that people are happy to put to use, but with which they don't want to engage further on a spiritual level?

Sullivan: Well, I can understand people seeing it that way. The first few points. It would be an absolute shame if the works of the church, whether they're schools or hospitals, welfare services, youth services, counselling, migrant services, whether they are weakened simply by the loss of community and government support, because of a scandal like this, yes.

Secondly, most people these days have the greatest contact with the church through those services, as opposed to turning up at Church. But at those services, it's more than just receiving a service. They actually feel the heart of the Church. They feel what motivates people about the Gospel. And at the end of the day, what motivates people about the Gospel is more important than anything.

Jacobs: I've got a text that says that while George Pell is there, no one will believe the Catholic response. Do you genuinely believe that you can bring the victims back into the church? Or is it more reasonable to assume that the church needs to make proper amends, to accept that for many people the damage is just about irreparable in terms of their connection with the Church. And surely people don't come back to the church from this experience. Or do they?

Sullivan: It's not about bringing people back to the Church. I love the new Pope, particularly because of his name (laughs) also what he is saying is that it's about, a Church is about going to the frontiers, it's about going to where people are, it's about immersing itself in their lives. It's about taking the risk of getting messy. It's a beautiful image. It's not about standing apart and waiting for the mob to turn up. And in this particular area, engaging with people who are damaged is exactly what the Pope is saying. Go to their lives. Don't ask their lives to be your lives. Understand their lives and help them live. And then, you're a church, no matter where that is.

Jacobs: How big are you expecting this job to be for you? What's the substance of it? This is going to take some years isn't it?

Sullivan: It looks like it, yes. It will probably take around three or so years, by the looks of things. It's a big job, and ah, um, you know, it's an important job, and I was scared to take it.

Jacobs: Really?

Sullivan: Sure.

Jacobs: Tell me why.

Sullivan: Well, I didn't want to, to start with. It's a pretty ugly area to have to deal and as I've said before, I didn't want to be associated and identified with this because I was angry about the past and how the Church has handled things. But at the same time, you know, I've spent a lot of my life, um, committed to what the Church does, in, particularly in the things you've talked about in healthcare and welfare and schools, and I know the people who work in those settings. I know what gets them out of bed in the morning. And I can relate to that. And I think most of the community can. And I think people want to know that the motivation and the spirit of that isn't going to get eroded. And so I figured, 'well, if you get asked, you better go and do something about it'. So it's a big job and hopefully I've got enough to keep going with it.

Jacobs: And just finally, tell me about the impact that taking this role on, has had on you.

Sullivan: Well, it gets pretty draining every day, but I have to say listening to people who are damaged has been pretty haunting, to be honest. A lot of people have given me the time to tell me what's happened, but they've also made it pretty clear that they're sick and tired of telling us what's happened. They want us to do something about it all and they expect us to take some responsibility and that's a daunting responsibility.

Jacobs: They said to you 'don't you let us down' haven't they, and that's a heavy thing to bear.

Sullivan: Yeah. I was pretty upset when that person said that to me because I took it seriously and I think about it every day.

Jacobs: Francis Sullivan, very interesting to talk to you. Thank you so much for your time, and I really appreciate you being with me here in the studio with me.

Sullivan: Thank YOU.

Jacobs: Francis Sullivan who's head of the Catholic Church's national Council on Truth Healing and Justice.

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The truth Justice and Healing Council has been established by the Catholic Church to help the Church's response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Its role is to oversee the Church's engagement with the Royal Commission, to develop new policies to protect young people and to ensure the Church responds to any future complaints appropriately, with justice and putting the needs of victims first.

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