

Teachers and the Church's Abuse Scandal

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The Catholic Church's history of child sexual abuse by the clergy and religious is shameful. Even though the last twenty years has seen vast improvements in the professionalism of administering abuse allegations, the broader history placed the institutional needs of the Church before those damaged by the abuse. It betrayed children, corroded the trust of the community and now threatens to undermine the very work of the Church in our community. Only the truth will heal this dark episode.

At its best the Catholic Church promotes the dignity of individuals and the common good of society. The pursuit of truth and goodness are its touchstones. As a beacon for what brings life to our lives, the Church stands for justice and compassion.

There is no better witness to this than the teaching profession and its ministry in schools. Teaching a holistic understanding of the human person and an ethical code of respecting life, its dignity and social obligations, the Church makes contemporary the spirit of the Gospel in an ever changing society.

Through its dedication to academic excellence and intellectual enquiry the Church joins with others in pursuing the truth and what works best for our world. Central to this pursuit of knowledge is the appreciation that the spiritual reality is as much a point of discovery and nurture for all of us as is any other revelation born of reflection and learning.

Grappling with life's challenges, even conundrums, requires clarity of values and a desire to do the right thing. We need the skills to make moral decisions and wise judgements. A sound holistic education becomes a great gift – thus the ministry of a Catholic school.

In these days where clerical sex abuse is so widely reported and discussed, Catholic teachers and Catholic school families may well feel the pressure about what is right and just in the unfolding story revealed by the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* and the other high profile inquiries being conducted across the country. A pressure fuelled as much by disbelief and anger than any urge to be defensive or apologetic. The upshot is often confusion, even disillusion.

For us in the Church these times challenge our commitment and our loyalty. They also call for a considered and intelligent embrace of the truth, regardless how ugly or distressing. For it is only by accepting the past that we allow it to teach us.

Finding ways to discuss the past, with its betrayal and blundering, will help formative minds come to terms with its lessons. Admitting the failures will help reclaim credibility. Making decisive change and reaching out to those who have been damaged will rekindle trust. Thus the Church must act on two fronts - walk humbly in its public response and act justly with victims.

This is a duty for us all, regardless of our proximity to the abuse history or our roles in the Church. In the end we are the Church. It is our energy and passion for the Gospel and all it means that will carry the Church forward. It is our dedication to the ministries of teaching, healing and social service that will help the Church reach into the lives of ordinary folk, vulnerable individuals and forgotten people. And as importantly, it is our love that will create and sustain families and relationships, based on security and nurture.

This is our witness at a time when the bona fides of the Church are being questioned. It presents not only an opportunity for action, but also one for learning.

With its past laid bare the Church can practically teach about reconciliation and atonement. Embracing the Royal Commission's revelations with honesty, courage and compassion and listening to the stories of victims can be the stuff of enlightenment for staff, parents and the school communities.

These will not be easy conversations, but they are necessary. Teachers are uniquely placed to translate the public narrative of the Church's atonement of its abuse history into occasions of insight and understanding. Apart from justice to victims, helping people to appreciate what real reconciliation requires may be some of the most important outcomes from the Royal Commission over these next years.

As with all education, providing balance and perspective is vital. It engenders critical thinking and discernment. This needs to be applied to the Church's story of handling child sexual abuse allegations and instances.

Since the 1990s considerable resources, both financial and human, have been toiling with a better, more professional approach to the administration and prevention of child sexual abuse matters. Ground breaking policies, like *Towards Healing* and *The Melbourne Response* have been instigated. Professional standards offices have been established and widespread education for staff and clergy undertaken. No longer can perpetrators be shifted from parish to parish and mandatory reporting systems now exist.

These changes were long overdue, but they have been in place and working well for close on two decades. They are evidence of how the Church has taken responsibility. They form the platform for the best practice system that the Church will develop.

Telling this part of our story shows that people of goodwill didn't just sit on their hands but made things happen for the better.

The Royal Commission's work will inevitably launch a public conversation about child sex abuse and the measures our society needs to take to protect children. It will be disturbing and threatening for many people. But it is a conversation we must have. Teachers are well placed to guide that conversation and present a balanced perspective on how we are at this moment in our history and where we go as a Church, to keep children safe.

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