

Building Reconciliation

This week I attended the annual assembly of the Jesuits and their leaders across the various social services; education, communications and spiritual and theological formation programs.

It was an impressive group of people, obviously dedicated to bringing the message of the Gospel to the diverse communities and individuals to which the Jesuits minister.

On the day I spoke we talked about the misery of child sexual abuse, its lifelong legacy of suffering and sorrow. As we listened to speakers and each other process the many layers to this insidious issue, we were encouraged to reflect and share our personal responses and reactions.

We expressed our frustration and sorrow over how genuine attempts at apologies seem to have fallen flat and disappoint the very people they are offered to, the victims and survivors.

These apologies so often seem to miss the mark. We struggle to really understand why heartfelt gestures and impassioned attempts to bridge what seems such a wide chasm, with people who have been damaged seem to fail. Is this a question of the constant need for action, to journey the difficult path of reconciliation together, rather than mere words of sorrow?

It was so obvious that the 200 plus participants at the assembly, some themselves victims of abuse, want to reconcile with people who have been abused. Yet the very nature of the damage done to victims and their families has led to their mistrust with the Church and left them feeling isolated and alone.

So how can real reconciliation happen? How can we build those bridges Pope Francis calls us to construct? How do we break down the walls of separation and difference?

As we listened we shared and hoped that ultimately compassion would win out!

Fr Steve Curtin, the Jesuit Provincial, a thoughtful and sincere person spoke movingly about the Society's journey in facing clerical abuse within its ranks. He was open, humble and receptive. He personified how we need to embrace the Royal Commission process and the public scrutiny it will bring. It was very inspiring.

So too was the preparedness of participants to speak honestly of where they are at with their feelings and aspirations for being in this changing Church. People did not shy from the harsh realities but used them to clarify what is important and what needs to be changed.

In many ways the Jesuit Assembly showed me what 'taking responsibility' as Church members means. We build reconciliation, but it doesn't happen in one day. We encourage dialogue and relationships, not impose them. We stay attentive to the way the Spirit prompts us to risk reaching out to others, finding common ground and sharing our frailties and weaknesses.

While we don't have the answers, we do have the willingness and passion to get this right.

Our shared search for what is true and good is in itself creative and will lead us through the fog!

Francis Sullivan