

Royal Commission....a time of soul-searching and healing

A Patrician Perspective

The recent announcement by the Federal Government of the setting up a Royal Commission examining sexual abuse in institutions has received bi-partisan support, strong community support and a firm commitment to cooperation by the Catholic Bishops and Congregational Leaders in Australia. The hope is that attitudes and practices that enabled such abuse to occur in the past will be identified, that failings will be humbly acknowledged, and, most of all, that the pain of victims will be heard and heeded, and that policies and protocols will be put in place seeking to ensure that such abuse never happens again.

It is an unfortunate reality that sexual abuse of minors takes place at many levels in society. It is particularly disturbing however that such abuse has been common in the Church and in Catholic institutions. The Church's mission is to be Christ's presence in the world, the compassionate Christ with harsh words of condemnation for those who offend against children. The fact that the Church sets high standards in sexual morality makes the betrayal of trust by some of its members all the more shameful. Sadly, the Patrician Brothers have not been spared failings in this regard.

It is the resolve of the Brothers to enter fully into the spirit of the Royal Commission seeking to be transparent and co-operative in the pursuit of healing and justice for victims.

There is a righteous anger among abuse victims, their families, friends and supporters about apparent Church attitudes and policies in dealing with instances of sexual abuse in the past. While not taking away from the criminality and gravity of such abuse it may be helpful though to keep things in perspective. A majority of the abuses highlighted in the media were committed thirty or forty years ago. The word 'paedophile' had not entered the common discourse then. Its symptoms, causes, and most of all, its serious impact, were poorly understood. With the wisdom of hindsight, Church authorities may well reflect 'if we knew then, what we know now', our responses and actions would have been different.

However culpable such ignorance may have been, other attitudes and practices which ultimately caused great grief to people were not uncommon in those times. It was only in 1992 that an Act was passed by the Federal Government outlawing sponsorship of sport by tobacco companies in Australia. Some may remember attending NRL Grand Finals in the early 1990's to be greeted on entry by young people in attractive company uniforms handing out complimentary packets of Winfield cigarettes. A far cry from current attitudes and practices, enlightened by a better understanding of the devastating effects of tobacco on health.

The 'fibro set' became a slogan describing many of those taking up residence in Sydney's expanding western suburbs, especially up to the 1970's. In that era, State Governments and Local Councils were approving not just family homes, but schools and hospitals that were using fibro, with its deadly asbestos, as a building component.

Again, quaint as it may seem now, it was only in the late 1980's that an Act was introduced banning corporal punishment in NSW schools.

All of which, along with many similar historical scenarios, call for understanding and balance in judging disclosures from the past through the eyes of the present.

And so, the Royal Commission will be likely to be more effective if it is conducted professionally and calmly, seeking to avoid symptoms of witch-hunt and trial by media. In establishing a climate of confidence and trust the Commission will best be able to pursue truth and justice for the victims.

Hopefully too, the Royal Commission will help society to develop a more rational approach to abusers themselves. Naming, shaming and vilifying all abusers equally, escapes the more serious challenge of identifying underlying causes and the development of programs and practices which may help to rehabilitate offenders, thus preventing further abuse. Instances abound of rehabilitation to normal life of once chronic alcoholics, people suffering from other serious forms of drug addiction, and even murderers. A common perception is that all Clergy and Religious who have been convicted of sexual abuse should be immediately dismissed . A question to ponder is: ‘What happens to these people then ?’. It is an entirely reasonable expectation that every possible effort be made to remove offenders from any form of service which brings them into contact with possible victims. It also seems reasonable to suggest, that where an offender shows remorse and an acknowledgement of hurt caused, that person’s rehabilitation can best be served by access to professional help and the support of a network of informed and vigilant friends.

Whereas statistics suggest that most sexual abuse is perpetrated within settings of families and neighbours, the focus of the Royal Commission will be on abuse committed in institutions. There is plenty of evidence to warrant such a focus. Again, the need arises to ensure balance and fairness in the scrutiny of institutions. The Catholic Church and its institutions certainly have attracted much media attention in recent years in the telling, and re-telling, of details in sexual abuse .

Charles Dickens opened his classic *Tale Of Two Cities* with the oft-quoted saying:

*It was the best of times.
It was the worst of times.*

The Royal Commission opens up such possibilities. It will be a painful time for many faced with an honest confrontation of demons of the past. It will be a time of healing for victims and a time for the strengthening of wills and policies earnestly seeking to ensure that such abuse never again happens in institutions. It will be a time of cleansing for the Catholic church, ridding itself of shadows which have been a scandal to the ordinary faithful who look to the Church as Christ’s presence in the world, upholding decency, dignity, and justice.