

At the hinge of history

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Drawing from her personal experiences as co-chair of the National Committee for Professional Standards and her family's own encounter with child sexual abuse, Sr Annette Cunliffe rsc reflects on this dark cloud hanging over the Church, the work towards healing, and the God-given opportunity for rebirth and purification towards a more humble, open church.

In announcing a Royal Commission into institutional responses to instances and allegations of child sexual abuse in Australia, the Prime Minister stated, "These are insidious, evil acts to which no child should be subject. The individuals concerned deserve the most thorough of investigations into the wrongs that have been committed against them. They deserve to have their voices heard and their claims investigated." Surely all right minded people must agree.

The scourge of sexual abuse in the Church and beyond has been a focus of media attention for months. The Victorian Joint Parliamentary Inquiry has begun its hearings and heard tragic stories of abuse and mishandling of complaints from the past, but sometimes of more recent origin, despite our considerable efforts to establish processes to respond with compassion and concern for victims.

In New South Wales, as well, various claims were made that led to calls for a Royal Commission. The Premier seemed inclined to act. At that stage, as Bishop Pat Power reflected in Eureka Street, "The Prime Minister took the only course open to her in agreeing to a Royal Commission". As others have noted, this scourge does not respect State borders.

Few of us are untouched by ministry or personal contact with victims and their families, or with those who have abused others. My responses are, of course, influenced by my own experiences, including my time as co-chair of the National Committee for Professional Standards and my knowledge of a family member who was abused by a priest and subsequently spiralled into depression and drug abuse, finally taking his own life and causing great sadness in the family.

Through the National Committee I was privileged to witness the extraordinary, healing work done by those working in both National and State Professional Standards Offices and their prevention initiatives. I also attended Conferences of committed people working in this field in English-speaking and some Asian countries.

Many consider that our Towards Healing processes lead the world. Sadly though, such abuse has permanent life-long effects and it is rare that any response comes even close to repairing the damage done. Prevention must be our aim, since even a compassionate response to those who have been abused cannot fully undo its effects. Tragically, human weakness, fear, lack of awareness or misguided loyalty can lead to a flawed approach to the process of dealing with complaints, thus inflicting even more damage on victims.

So how did I respond to the announcement of this Royal Commission? One of my first feelings was relief that, at last, this whole question might be openly investigated and the goals of prevention, healing and justice promoted. This was tinged, humanly, with selfish concern at the demands that this will place on all of us. I also felt a sense of shame for the many times and ways that the Church and its leadership failed to respond as we are called to do as committed followers of Jesus.

At the CRA Assembly in June this year Br Philip Pinto quoted Wangari Maathai, "In the course of history there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground; a time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other" (Nobel Lecture, Oslo, 10th December, 2004). Philip suggested that this is such a time – a "hinge of history" as he termed it.

We must seize this time, a time of trial, of suffering, yet a God-given opportunity for a rebirth like that of Baptism, where purification clears the path to new life as a more humble, open church with that "mind that was in Christ Jesus". (Philippians 2:5).

Sr Annette Cunliffe rsc is the congregational leader of the [Sisters of Charity](#).

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Frank S

Posted at 2012-11-23 22:58:02

On page 75 of the submission from the Victorian Church, there is a key statement:

The Final (1997) Report commended the Church's developments in relation to Towards Healing and set out the Towards Healing principles and procedures for dealing with allegations of sexual abuse as a model for other churches or religious organisations"

However, it does us no good to bury our heads in the sand. It is an admirable start to have such a protocol; but it is quite a different matter to effectively implement it. It appears that recent media reports would suggest that implementation has been unsatisfactory.

You may not be aware of a couple of Lateline programmes, which you can access here:

http://www.abc.net.au/iview/?WT.srch=1&WT.mc_id=Corp_TV-iview|Lateline_AdWords.:%2Blateline%20australia_b_s_19619213599_&gclid=CODc78ji0LMCFdBZpgoduVYAQA#/series/Lateline

The Towards Healing protocol was cited by Cardinal Pell in the 13/11/2012 Lateline programme as an example of how the Church is improving its performance. He referred to its having been twice reviewed by Prof. Patrick Parkinson. However, in the Lateline programme of the following night (14/11/2012), Prof. Parkinson advised that he had withdrawn his support, because the Church had failed to take action against clergy who did not comply with its requirements. He claimed to be able to point to "contemporary cover-ups" and asserted that what has transpired amounted to "organised criminality".

I also refer you to the admittedly cynical opinion of the Broken Rites group to the Towards Healing protocol: <http://brokenrites.alphalink.com.au/nletter/page185-towards-healing.html>

St Francis said: "Preach the Gospel; and if you have to, use words". Until our Church squarely addresses these concerns with actions rather than just words, I expect that we will have no credibility with non-Catholics, nor with the victims of abuse and their families.

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[Mary Tehan](#)

Posted at 2012-11-22 15:13:30

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Please also consider adopting Prof Des Cahill's suggestions (available on Radio National Religion and Ethics program this morning).

Also remember Albert Einstein's insight (I paraphrase) that a 'wicked problem' needs a response at a different, higher level to the level that the problem emerged in the first place.

** Isaiah 11:1 says it all.

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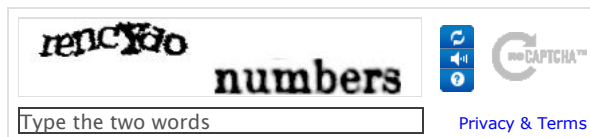
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