

Keeping the Faith

By Kate Bartlett

Kate Bartlett is a chaplain at the University of Newcastle. Her job is to foster and support the faith and spirituality of students. Recent revelations from the Special Commission of Inquiry have saddened and challenged her, yet her faith and love of God stands firm.

Despite a degree in theology and many years of working in ministry I have what may seem a simplistic theology. For me it is all about love. God's infinite love for me loves me into being and loves me into loving all God's creation.

Sexual abuse is abhorrent. Child sexual abuse is more abhorrent and child sexual abuse by clergy is even more greatly abhorrent. The betrayal and the evil of these crimes can never be overstated. The pain that emanates and reverberates from these crimes, from the tsunami-like forces in the lives of survivors and their families and the families of perpetrators, to the waves in the lives of ordinary Catholics is beyond words and beyond understanding.

Suddenly a faith and a theology of love doesn't feel quite so simple!

However, my faith is in God who is beyond our ability to describe or understand. The church that I belong to is charged to fulfil the mission of God which is to love always and unconditionally. Unfortunately, the church is not only divine but also very much human and within the church we see the very best and sadly the very worst of humanity.

The horror of clergy sexual abuse and the failure to protect our children is definitely humanity at its worst. As painful as it is, it is so important that this sin, this abscess, is brought in to the light, lanced and whatever healing that can happen is made possible. Despite this huge failing, the people of God continue to bring love to the world in many ways. Most of them are not things that make the headlines but they do make a difference.

I attended a funeral recently of an elderly lady who had lived a very full life. The love for Marie and her family was palpable. The church was the one that I was baptised, confirmed, received first communion and was married in. The people around me, many I had known all my life, were from several generations. Others were the children or grandchildren of the community. It was a simple ceremony but the tangible love and support in that gathering was a reminder to me of why I keep the faith.

I am also regularly reminded of that during my working day. As a Chaplain at the University of Newcastle it is common for me to share Eucharist with a small group of people each week. It is usual for there to be maybe ten people representing seven or eight different nationalities yet we come together in faith, share of the love of God and also learn a little more about our vastly different communities of origin.

Also as a Chaplain I work alongside ministers from seven other Christian denominations, a Buddhist and a Baha'i and liaise with the Islamic students association. Together we work for the welfare and

spiritual nurturing of the students and staff of the University. The Chaplaincy centre is a place of hospitality where all are welcome.

At the parish Mass I attend on Sunday morning I gather with victims of sexual abuse, relatives of clergy who have abused or worked closely with those who have and many others. I can't speak for the rest of the assembly but I know that the crisis of sexual abuse in the church and particularly in the Diocese of Maitland Newcastle has challenged me to really look at my faith to acknowledge what it means to me and what place church plays in my faith. My faith and love for God stands firm despite the challenge. My faith and the love it represents is integral to who I am and how I live my life. I believe that I am called always to love and I pray that, despite the many times I fail, I may continue to do so.