

**The Bearing of Witness**

This week the Royal Commission begins its public hearings. In preparation, the Council has been responding to requests from the Commission and researching and writing submission papers that will ultimately inform Church policy.

I am grateful for the wonderful support and expert advice from Catholic social service agencies, Catholic education and employment offices, professional standards offices, and dioceses and religious orders across Australia. Our submissions on Towards Healing and Child Safe Institutions are under review and we have started preliminary work on our Children in Out of Home Care submission.

As we work on these papers I am mindful of the reason we are addressing the issues, preparing the policy papers and complying with Commission requests.

Over the past few weeks I have been saddened, as I have listened to more disturbing stories from people abused in the Catholic Church. On every occasion I marvel at their strength and courage to share their pain and trauma.

I hear their frustration when they feel people don’t truly understand what it is like to live every day with the devastating effects of abuse. Going through a process of reparation or even compensation doesn't necessarily 'kick start' the momentum for healing.

Sadly, many survivors still see too many signs that the Church 'just doesn't get it’. This is compounded when they hear explanations that the abuse is in the past, and the Church now handles issues of abuse in a more professional and caring manner. It is as if their traumatic experience is being denied because it happened a long time ago.

Justice McClellan made it clear when opening the Royal Commission that the Commission would 'bear witness' alongside those who had been abused. Hopefully, people damaged from abuse can find in the Royal Commission process, a proper recognition for what has happened, an affirmation of their experience, and an acknowledgement of the support they need. I hope they also find that institutions, like the Church, claim responsibility for their role in the abuse.

The Royal Commission will be a profoundly emotional and draining experience for all involved. As a nation the process leading to the Government calling a Royal Commission has been difficult. As a Church we have not always embraced open inquiries and objective assessments of our performance on child sex abuse.

Regardless, we are now at a point of public scrutiny that requires frank and open participation, with genuine recollection of the past and a sincere explanation of what happened and why.

The experts tell us that healing only begins when trust is established. Trust is based on truth. Truth comes packaged in honesty and humility.

This is the disposition the Council takes into the Royal Commission. Our purpose is more than establishing credibility for the Church. We hope to send a ray of hope to those who struggle daily with the effects of abuse.

Our prayer, and our hope, is for those people who feel isolated and forgotten, and those who question if the Church really cares for them. May they see from our actions that the Church truly hears them, believes them and supports them in every way.



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17 September 2013