

## **The Catholic Church, sexual abuse and a new agenda**

A recent media report of a Catholic brother jailed for at least three and half years for abusing children in one of our Catholic schools is the sort of Court report that is often seen in the pages of our newspapers and across other media.

While it reflects an appalling history of sexual abuse of children within the Catholic Church it failed to highlight the extreme damage and suffering the victims of this type of abuse go through and the impact it can have on their lives.

It is this damage and suffering that is at the centre of the Catholic Church's *Towards Healing* victims' reparation protocol.

For the better part of 20 years the Catholic Church in Australia has used *Toward Healing* to offer victims of sex abuse by catholic priests, brothers, teachers and others church workers a way to tell their story and to receive pastoral care and reparation.

It is a process that has worked well for some and hasn't worked at all for others.

Through *Towards Healing* church leaders hear what the impact of sexual abuse has been on victims. These typically include failed relationships, careers and financial setbacks; constant and debilitating feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, guilt and shame. And much more.

In essence *Towards Healing* offers a victim the chance to tell their story, personally and directly, to someone in authority in the Church – often a Bishop - who will accept responsibility for what happened, acknowledge the damage done, give a sincere apology and put in place pastoral care and reparation.

This 'pastoral care and reparation' can take many different forms – assistance finding and paying for counseling, school or university fees, help finding employment, covering the costs of rent, equipment such as computers, a vehicle, medical or dental expenses.

More often than not the reparation can also include a payment that will differ from victim to victim.

The *Toward Healing* process will soon be at the very centre of the hearings at the Royal Commission into institutional Responses to Child sexual Abuse when in December two weeks have been set aside to interrogate the process.

The Truth Justice and Healing Council, which is representing more than 200 church organisations at the Commission, has this week lodged its submission on *Towards Healing* with the Commission.

It is the most comprehensive document ever produced by the Church outlining the history of how the church has dealt with sexual abuse and what it is doing now.

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The submission is the work of hundreds of dedicated people across many areas of the Church.

I thank them all very much for their work and their commitment to helping us tell the full story and working towards making the many different church institutions as safe as possible for children and young people.

Importantly the document outlines a set of reform options which will be considered by Church leaders over coming months.

These proposals recognise the Church must do better when dealing with victims of sexual abuse and as it works to make sure Catholic institutions as safe as possibly for children.

The two most significant reform proposals involve major changes to *Towards Healing* and the introduction of a new National Board to oversee and report, publically, on all aspects of child protection in the Church bodies.

The changes to *Towards Healing* would see new independent compensation commissioners appointed to determine payments to victims– this would separate the pastoral responses in *Towards Healing* from the determination of compensation payment.

Other proposals include appointing lay and independent experts to strengthen the Church's National Committee of Professional Standards which oversees the *Towards Healing* process.

The other significant change is the creation of an independent national board to develop and administer national child protection standards. The board would monitor adherence to these standards and publicly report on compliance.

The board would also provide more rigorous assessment, monitoring, auditing and enforcement of *Towards Healing* practices and see the introduction of greater public reporting on how the Church more broadly and *Towards Healing* measures up against the new standards.

These, and other reform proposals, are currently being fully developed by the Truth Justice and Healing Council and will be put to the Church leadership early in the New Year.

They are also being developed mindful of recommendations that might be made by the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry and the Cuneen Special Commission of Inquiry, as well as this Royal Commission.

What is certain is the Catholic Church in Australia is moving.

It recognises and acknowledges the devastating harm caused by child sexual abuse and that its leaders are committed to helping repair the wrongs of the past, to listen to and hear

victims, to put their needs first, and to do everything possible to ensure a safer future for children.

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**TRUTH  
JUSTICE  
HEALING  
COUNCIL**

Since the public release of the submission there has been extensive media coverage – radio, print, online and another challenging interview with Tony Jones on *Lateline*.

This coverage is important.

I say this not just because it has for the most part been positive but because it maintains the community interest in what is a very important story – the history and responses to child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and other institutions across Australia.

Francis Sullivan,  
CEO Truth Justice Healing Council  
3 October 2013  
[www.tjhcouncil.org.au](http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au)

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