

A new approach

When we lodged our Towards Healing submission to the Royal Commission last week, we described it as the most significant overhaul of the Church's approach to clerical sexual abuse in its more than 200-year history in Australia.

I truly believe our submission is a beacon of light and hope for victims of clerical sex abuse. As much as I would like, we cannot change our shameful history, but we can be confident, with the implementation of this document and other reforms, that the future for victims, and everyone within the Church, will be different.

I don't take this stance lightly. In my position I have spoken to many, many victims about their appalling treatment. In amongst their tears of sadness, anger and frustration they pleaded with me to do everything possible to assist people who have been abused and to prevent this tragedy from ever happening again. Their struggle and their strength have assisted in the development of these reform proposals.

The Towards Healing submission pieces together the expert advice and best practice of hundreds of people across all elements of the Church. The two most significant reform proposals involve major changes to the current Towards Healing process - where the pastoral response will be separate from the determination of compensation payments. Another option we are putting forward is the introduction of a new National Board to oversee and report publically on all aspects of child protection in the Church bodies

Of course the Church is still subject to cynicism and criticism when reform is discussed, and to be fair I understand why. It will take a long time to build trust, to build respect and to build honour. For many it may be too late.

But, I ask that we open our minds and our hearts and look at these reforms with fresh eyes. The Church has been inspired to change from the top down with Pope Francis breathing new life into the Church.

"We must restore hope to young people, help the old, be open to the future, and spread love. Be poor amongst the poor. We need to include the excluded and preach peace," Pope Francis said.

The reform proposals discussed in our Towards Healing submission are a starting point for significant reforms that will assist and care for victims and ensure the Church is a safe place for all children and young people.

I was interested to read a recent quote in the newspaper by Ewen McKenzie, the coach of the Wallabies, when disciplining a player.

"We can't tolerate more of the same because all we were getting was more of the same. We weren't getting behavioural change. You can't keep doing the same thing and expect a different result."

Our submission shows we will not accept more of the same, we are changing and we understand we need to care for victims for the long haul. We acknowledge our mistakes and our reforms show the Catholic Church is moving in the right direction.

In summary the Catholic Church reform agenda proposals include:

- appointing independent compensation commissioners to determine payments to victims who go through the victim response process known as Towards Healing. This would separate the pastoral responses in Towards Healing from the determination of financial payments
- the appointment of lay and independent experts to strengthen the Church's National Committee of Professional Standards
- the introduction 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
- the introduction of greater transparency through public reporting by both the new national board and the Towards Healing process.

Some might criticise us for getting to far ahead of the Royal Commission and the reforms it might recommend when it reports sometime in the future.

We are very aware of this and the proposals we are putting forward in our submission are mindful of the Commission and will be developed in the knowledge that whatever we do now will need to be adapted if necessary.

To read our full submission [click here](#).

Our submission, along with 14 others, will be thoroughly examined by the Royal Commission in early December. As difficult and challenging as it will be, it will also be the start of the healing process that will reshape and redefine the Church.

Francis Sullivan

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