

TRANSCRIPT
INTERVIEW

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Francis Sullivan, CEO, Truth Justice and Healing Council
Geoff Hutchison, Presenter, Mornings

Geoff Hutchison: Francis Sullivan, good morning.

Francis Sullivan: Good morning Geoff.

Hutchison: Fifteen recommendations made yesterday, many of them seemingly focused on the Catholic Church, but not exclusively. How do you respond to them?

Sullivan: Well the first point to make is that this whole exercise in Victoria is about letting the truth come out. To some degree, a lot of it has, and that's good.

The recommendations are going to issues of compensation and representation for victims. That is good. The commentary does criticise the leadership of the Catholic Church for its past concealment and at times moving of priests and not treating victims fairly and justly. That is good. And now we need to move into a new era where victims of clerical sex abuse, no matter where they live in Australia, have access to a national compensation scheme sooner rather than later.

Hutchison: We will talk about that national compensation scheme in just a moment. When we look at these recommendations anyone who relocates an offender, anyone who knows of an offender and says nothing could now be subject to criminal charges. Does your church, do all churches and agencies, have to understand now that secrecy won't go unpunished.

Sullivan: One hopes so Geoff. I mean it is a bit of a no brainer. In the past when priests or brothers were moved, knowingly moved, because of past misdemeanours or because of abuse of children – that is inexcusable. It was inexcusable then and its inexcusable is now. It can't be defended then and it can't be defender now. I think this inquiry, just like the Royal Commission, will make it abundantly clear that the community is saying that it is wrong.

Hutchison: Denis Hart, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne stands by the view that any information on abuse gained through the confessional remains secret, that it's sacrosanct. I assume you believe similarly?

Sullivan: Yes I do. I mean at the end of the day, I notice that Denis Hart, the Archbishop of Melbourne, made it very clear that even in the confessional, the Priest hearing the confession can insist on the informant going to the police or can literally stop the whole encounter and insist that issues to do with proper police reporting are dealt with. But I am not an expert in this area and clearly the archbishops and the religious leaders of Australia have a definite view.

Hutchison: Yeah. Do you accept that new laws might just test that assumption that confession is sacrosanct?

Sullivan: I am not sure. It doesn't seem to have been floated in any substantial way yet anywhere. I mean it goes to some fundamental questions about privilege for all sorts of professionals, including your own profession, so I am assuming that that debate, if it happens, will have far reaching ramifications.

Hutchison: Francis Sullivan is my guest, the CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council within the Catholic Church of Australia.

We mentioned yesterday this Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry is very important. It was seen to some extent as the forerunner of a Royal Commission. Now we have your organisation within the Catholic Church. I am sure there is some confusion amongst the community. You're coming to Perth today, can you tell us why.

Sullivan: Sure, I am actually meeting up with the Archbishop of Perth in particular, to advise him about where we are at with the preparations for the Royal Commission. Our council was established by the archbishops and all the bishops actually of Australia and the religious leaders because they took a commitment to fully cooperate with the Royal Commission. The trouble with the Catholic Church is that there is no, one, single entity. You have 189 religious orders and 34 dioceses. All in a sense are an authority unto their own and if we are going to cooperate fully with the Royal Commission there needs to be a coordinating body, and that is us.

Hutchison: How are they an authority unto their own? I'm not a Catholic, I would have assumed differently.

Sullivan: Yes, a lot of people do. A lot of people think that it is Catholic Church Inc. from the top down – one command system. It doesn't work that way. A bishop has ultimate authority in his diocese, just like a religious leader has in her congregation and they obviously answer through to the Pope on matters of faith and morals. But on the rest of it – on responsibility for their resources and responsibility for their services – it falls to them. In a sense one bishop can't tell another bishop what to do. One religious leader can't tell another religious leader what to do. There can be a perception in the

community that, you know, someone like the Cardinal runs the Catholic Church in Australia. Well that's just not the case. He only has responsibility for the geographic area of the Archdiocese of Sydney.

Hutchison: Returning to the point you brought up earlier in our conversation about the ability for people to claim as a result of this abuse. What do you have in mind?

Sullivan: Well, what was good about yesterday, I mean there were a lot of good things that we mentioned earlier, but one of the recommendations is an initiative in Victoria to try and do something with their Victims of Crime Tribunal and access to it. However, the Royal Commissioner himself, Peter McClelland, has already floated his interest in a general compensation scheme for Australia. What that will mean is that people who have been abused – particularly as children through sex abuse in institutions, like the Catholic Church – would be able to access, with certainty, a compensation scheme that doesn't require them to go down the legal pathway. A lot of times that becomes a lawyers' picnic. It enables them to access a scheme quickly, relatively simply, and that the payments – in our case we are arguing that payments shouldn't be capped – they should address that person's needs in order for them to be supported throughout their life.

Hutchison: Is this funded by the Catholic Church?

Sullivan: Personally anything to do with any abuse in the Catholic Church, the Catholic Church will fund. No problem.

The other important part about this Geoff, is that the days of the Catholic Church investigating itself are over. The whole issue about investigating allegations, assessing them, settling them and then awarding compensation should be done by an independent body, probably a statutory body. The community needs that confidence. I mean we've seen in the Victorian inquiry and we'll probably see in the Royal Commission plenty of examples of where people are at odds with the Catholic Church about the way things have been handled. It's time for the Catholic Church to step aside from that.

Hutchison: Francis Sullivan is my guest. 1300 222 720
He's the CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council within the Catholic Church of Australia.

Hutchison: Mr Sullivan, those who are sympathetic to your situation, might suggest you're a bit damned if you do, damned if you don't at this point in time. But this morning, Anthony Foster a man whose daughters were repeatedly raped by their parish priest, causing one of them to suicide and the other who, after a binge drinking episode was involved in a car accident and is now permanently disabled.

He had to admit today to a suspicion that after yesterday's findings, which were pretty damning, this announcement of yours today is something of a smoke-screen. How do you reassure him that it's not?

Sullivan: Well firstly I'd like to acknowledge the fact that people are quite cynical, even sceptical about what the Church says particularly through this period. All I've said is: 'don't go on what we say, go on what we do'. And all through this we've tried to say there needs to be a better deal for victims. That's why we waited until the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry reported. We have already suggested this idea in one of our submissions to the Royal Commission previously. The main game though really is for attorney's-general in states and territories and the Commonwealth Attorney-General to meet as soon as possible to start thrashing out how one of these national compensation schemes can work and how it can get up sooner rather than later. I mean the Royal Commission could go four-five years. It will make recommendations and then governments will toss around whether they'll accept them or not. So the possibility of a national scheme could well and truly be over five years away. It can happen sooner. Now the Royal Commission is an exercise in national leadership. All states and territories and their attorneys-general can clearly exercise over this issue. There's no reason why they can't convene meetings now, start putting this on the agenda and involve people like Anthony Foster, involve victims groups in the design of the scheme. Make sure that what we do put in place as a country is responsive and is real.

Hutchison: I appreciate you talking to me today. Thank you for your time.

Sullivan: Thanks very much Geoff.

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