

## **The truth will bind us together**

It is only days away from the public hearings on *Towards Healing* at the Royal Commission, when the public and media attention will turn to the Catholic Church.

Catholics and non-Catholics will be shocked and disillusioned when they hear the details of the four Queensland based case studies, and how the Church handled the cases and treated victims.

One case study involves a young girl who was abused in the late 70's and early 80's by a priest who has since died. Two other cases deal with the abuse of Catholic schoolboys by the Marist Brothers in the 1970's. A fourth case study deals with a victim, who was one of a number of children, abused in the late 1960's by a priest.

*Towards Healing* has a clear set of guidelines and protocols. As the case studies are examined we will learn whether these protocols were followed and adhered to. We will discover where the gaps are and what went wrong. This will demonstrate why the Church needs stronger governance and procedures and why Church leaders need to be held accountable to a set of standards.

Undoubtedly this will be a difficult time for the Catholic Church, but it is also a once in a lifetime opportunity to take responsibility. We must admit our mistakes, say sorry, ask forgiveness, and importantly make changes.

When former Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced the Royal Commission into the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse last November, the Catholic Church made a commitment to approach the Royal Commission in a spirit of openness and honesty. During the past 12 months many people throughout the Church have worked extremely hard researching and preparing documentation so that the Church, and its past, can be thoroughly examined. Nothing will be concealed or covered up in respect to what Church personnel did or failed to do.

This is not the time for the Church to be defensive. Now is the time for the truth to bind us together. We must not let this time in our history cause a bitter wedge. The famous passage from John 8:32 says – “then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Knowing what happened gives us the freedom to right the wrongs, to care for victims and ensure this abuse never happens again.

As we know, clerical sex abuse has an on-going impact; this was once again made very clear to me when I met with parishioners from Holy Spirit Church, Kincumber on the NSW central coast last week. The parish has been saddened by the removal of priests for misconduct, but secrecy and lack of communication exacerbated the situation. Many parishioners were angry they were never told what actually happened and the matter was never discussed.

# Blog

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This build up of resentment is unnecessary. To me, it raises deeper issues. If we are to take responsibility for how our Church evolves, we need to be real with one another. We need to know about the past and how things were handled, and we need to talk about it openly. We need to discuss the leadership in the Church and the relationship between the laity and the clergy. Truthful, open conversations will build lasting relationships with the Church.

Last week I met with the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and gave them an update on our work and our preparations for the Royal Commission. It was heartening to receive such widespread support and endorsement for our work in representing the Catholic Church.

During the Royal Commission we will keep you updated on the latest news and information from the Royal Commission on our website, [www.tjhcouncil.org.au](http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au), through our regular newsletters, blog posts and across our social media platforms.

Pope Francis said he wants the Catholic Church to *“act decisively to stop sexual abuse of children by priests and ensure that the perpetrators undergo due process.”*

When *Towards Healing* is examined, the Catholic Church is well prepared and positioned to listen, to hear and to act decisively. Over the next few weeks our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families as they retell their stories and relive the horror of their abuse. We are hopeful this will be the start of their healing journey.

Francis Sullivan

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