

Get involved

I wasn't surprised when the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child blasted the Catholic Church last week on its handling and management of child sex abuse. While there have been many critics of the report there is no question that throughout the world, the Catholic Church has an appalling history of child sex abuse. The status and reputation of the Church was often put before the needs of survivors and crimes were covered up and ignored.

The Committee has called on the Vatican to immediately remove all clergy who are known or suspected child abusers and turn them over to authorities. The Vatican responded quickly, saying the Church was committed to 'defending and protecting the rights of the child' and promised to give the UN report 'thorough examination'.

In response to media requests last week I spoke of the importance of the Vatican making a commitment to be open and transparent to the community. It is essential the Vatican does not become defensive, does not divert the issue into a diplomatic spat and attempt to contextualize the past with the measures it is undertaking today. [Watch here](#)

In our context, in Australia, we have the Royal Commission. Like the Vatican we have to be honest and acknowledge that it was the Church's lack of transparency and unwillingness to be open with the community that was a strong driver in why we have a Royal Commission today. It is essential that in the spirit of openness and accountability that we continue to fess up to our past and do all we can to enable survivors, and people who have been damaged, the chance to tell their story and access just outcomes to assist them.

The findings in the UN Committee's report will once again disappoint many Catholics around the world who have lost faith and hope in the Church. This is why we need independent statutory bodies who can investigate the abuse issues and then determine just compensation. It will be incumbent upon the Church to pay the compensation and to establish ongoing pastoral support for the survivors of child sex abuse. The days of the Church investigating itself are well and truly over.

Pope Francis recently called clerical sex abuse "the shame of the Church" and last December he established a commission to study how to prevent abuse and help victims. The Vatican is making a real attempt to address clerical sex abuse and to ensure the Church is safer for children. But it is going to take more than words; it is action that will begin to engage people and hopefully rebuild trust in the Church.

Last week I travelled north and met with groups in Toowoomba and Rockhampton. It is always encouraging to meet and talk with people on the ground, doing the hard yards, in preparation for the Royal Commission.

Blog

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In Toowoomba I met with teachers and community members in the staff room at a Toowoomba Primary School (The name of the school has been withheld for legal reasons). This group, along with survivors and their families, has a particularly difficult time ahead as the Royal Commission, beginning in Brisbane next week, examines allegations of child sexual abuse at the school from 2007.

The day before I met with Clergy and Catholic education leaders in Rockhampton. Speaking with the people responsible for the management and response to all child protection issues in the Catholic Church I was heartened by their dedication and their support of the Royal Commission and the open and transparent approach we are taking.

As in so many of the places I visit it is very clear that the grass roots of the Catholic Church want to understand what went so badly wrong. They want to know why clerical sexual abuse took hold in places around Australia and they want to know that it can never happen again.

Importantly they want to know what they can do, and every time I'm asked this I answer; 'get involved, ask questions, organize parish support groups, let your voice be heard.'

It is clear from the UN report, and other investigations taking place around the world, that clerical sex abuse is no longer a secret. The best, and only way forward, is to recognize these crimes, assist survivors and do everything possible to ensure the Church is a safe place for children. The Vatican must show strong leadership for the millions of Catholics around the world and demonstrate a zero tolerance of clerical sex abuse.

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