

Working harder for change

The Catholic Church has been involved in two concurrent hearings at the Royal Commission this week and it has been an intense and difficult time for everyone concerned, particularly survivors and their families. Some are telling their stories publicly for the first time.

During the past two weeks I have travelled between Adelaide, for the St Ann's Special School hearing, and Sydney for the John Ellis case. The hearings, whilst harrowing, have been professional and fair. The Commissioners and Counsel Assisting must be commended for the methodical and sophisticated manner in which they have structured the hearings giving everyone a voice and a chance to be heard in a highly pressured environment.

Survivors have had the time and the support to tell their stories. Church officials were questioned extensively, giving them the opportunity to explain how they, and the Church, dealt with the matters under investigation.

In both cases the Church admitted where failures existed and where the Church placed its own interests ahead of its people.

In the St Ann's case survivors and their families spoke of their trauma and their feelings of anger, frustration, hurt and isolation. Church officials were able to explain what went wrong, and how, although inadequate at times, their responses were genuinely motivated by pastoral care.

The John Ellis case has been a forensic unraveling of both the Sydney Archdiocese's approach to the *Towards Healing* process and the litigation.

There has been close public scrutiny in both cases. This has been positive and helpful as it enables the community to get a better understanding of what actually happened. It has also been good to hear from our Church leaders, Archbishop Wilson and Cardinal Pell, and for them to have an opportunity to explain their responsibilities in the cases.

The St Ann's hearing finished in Adelaide on Monday and the John Ellis hearing concludes this week. The next time the Catholic Church is involved in a public hearing will be in Perth in late April.

While the Royal Commission's public hearings draw the bulk of the media attention, behind the scenes the Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) is listening to the advice and recommendations from the hearings and feeding this information back into the preparation and development of our reform documents.

Blog

**TRUTH
JUSTICE
HEALING
COUNCIL**

Likewise, the TJHC is hard at work finalising our Issues Paper on Civil Litigation. We are also working with the Royal Commission on their research project on child protection programs in schools.

And we are looking forward to the Royal Commission's Roundtable on Out of Home Care on 16 April in Sydney. This will be a small gathering of experts from around the country, including academics, practitioners, regulators and government. The roundtable will discuss a range of issues related to the prevention of child sex abuse in out-of-home care. The TJHC made a submission on this issue to the Royal Commission in December last year.

I welcome the announcement this week of members of the Vatican's Child Abuse Commission. It was pleasing to see the Vatican has followed a similar model to the TJHC with survivors of clerical sex abuse, and four laywomen out of eight, on the Commission. This is a major step forward in the Vatican's fight to stamp out sexual abuse within the Catholic Church.

I met one of the members of the Commission, Sheila Hollins, in Canberra last year. She will be a great inclusion to the Commission and will have a positive influence over the way in which the Vatican approaches child sex abuse issues in the future.

The Royal Commission is certainly doing an excellent job in drilling down and getting a thorough understanding of the processes and events that lead to the Catholic Church failing young children and the community so badly.

After listening to the hearings and the media many Catholics may feel ashamed, and completely disillusioned with the Church. It is so very difficult to understand how this has happened when it goes against everything the Church stands for.

At these times I try and focus on the survivors of some terrible crimes. We owe it to them to listen, to learn and respond and to 'get it right', and to do all we can so that the trauma they went through is never experienced by anyone again. Now is the time to stand in the shame, say sorry, work harder and gather all that is good within the Church to do all it can to get rid of child sex abuse forever.

Francis Sullivan

27 March 2014

www.tjhcouncil.org.au