

A Parish faces the Royal Commission

Tony Doherty, parish priest of Rose Bay Parish in Sydney, offers a suggestion for parishes to address the feelings arising in the hearts of those in the pews as we hear the stories of abuse and how they were handled. While a very practical and detailed program, it also offers hope and insight. It is offered as one parishes' experience to be adapted and used in other places.

In, at least, the last couple of years stories of sexual abuse of vulnerable children have broken upon us all like some sort of hideous tidal wave. The calling of a Royal Commission into institutional abuse will make it impossible to avoid facing this issue in our own lives, in the lives of our colleagues and in the minds and imagination of those we minister to. Without trying to unnecessarily dramatise the situation, the spiritual health of individual Catholics, parents of Catholic school children, children and adolescents themselves and the very fabric of parish life itself is at stake.

No priest needs to be reminded of this situation.

In the face of all of this – within our local parish - what can we do? What way can we sensibly respond to this momentous pastoral issue? How can we find a balanced approach to this issue that deals with the sensitivity of a wide range of people, some of whom might have been close to the experience of abuse themselves or experiencing it within their families of friends.

What is outlined here is one modest pastoral strategy. It was simply a toe in the water, in one particular parish – but on reflection it has gone towards some level of healing.

The Plan

A notice was placed in the Parish Bulletin:

Turmoil in the Church – a parish meeting

It has been suggested that it would be a sensible idea to call a parish meeting of those who would like to come together to discuss the tumultuous events of the last few weeks in the Australian Catholic Church. The purpose of such a meeting would simply allow those attending to have the opportunity to express how they feel about these events, to consider how as a parish or as an individual we should respond to what is happening, or simply to come together as a community of faith to appreciate who we are at a time like this.

Broad plan of action: Invite any interested or distressed people to come together to express their feelings, to listen to others within the 'safe' place of the local parish.

Venue: Parish Centre which holds 50 people comfortably. Music playing as people arrived. Meeting concludes with a time for reflection and prayer and a cup of tea.

The Meeting

1. Introduction: Parish Priest 5 minutes

2. Welcome: The Catholic church has been the subject to serious criticism in recent weeks. Issues, many of them not new, have been the subject of unprecedented media attention.

This is not a time for timid apologies. Children have been damaged, sometimes irreparably. Their futures placed in serious jeopardy.

These stories have left many confused, angry, frustrated, and depressed. Sometimes not knowing how best to respond – not only to others but also even to ourselves.

Tonight's meeting is intended to providing a safe place for those attending to express how they feel about these events, to listen to others, and to reflect calmly as a community of faith on stories we are hearing.

After a time of listening, to consider how as a parish, or as an individual we should respond to what is happening.

It is believed that as a parish, a community of faith committed to support one another, that there will be considerable benefit in appreciating just who we are at a time like this.

This may be the first of such meetings. There may emerge clearly the benefit of coming together some time next year to continue this conversation.

3. May I introduce n..... to say a few words about how he understands this situation. N..... is a child psychologist who has worked with victims of various sorts of abuse - sexual, physical, emotional - in both Sydney and London – it should be noted none of this work has been with victims of clerical abuse.

He is here as a Catholic first but also as someone who has - through his work and studying child development - a view on the broader impact of both the direct and indirect ramifications of abuse, as well as the toxicity of the term itself and the wider feelings it invokes in all of us.

I thought it would be useful to hear him on this subject for a couple of minutes as a way of opening the meeting to everyone here.

Perhaps no more than 5 minutes. It is important that the substantial time be given to the general discussion and not a lecture.

4. Time for interaction. Parish Priest

My suggestion is that the assembled group takes no more than four or five minutes sharing their initial reactions to what has been said with one another in twos or threes.

Then the meeting will be opened up to general comment, and questions (30/40 minutes - no longer)

The facilitator sets the principle that no one speaks twice before each has the opportunity to speak once. He gently invited those who had not spoken to offer a comment if they wished. Everyone of the 30 present spoke.

This seemed an important part of the dynamic

5. Prayer and Music

On the theme of reconciliation. Not averting our gaze from the damage that has been done to the young, praying for the victims of abuse of whatever kind.

6. Final reflection (read)

The human body is an amazing masterpiece. With the senses, we see, hear, taste, smell and touch the world, drawing its mystery inside us. With the mind, we probe the eternal structures of things. With the face, we present ourselves to the world and recognise each other. But it is the heart that makes us human.

The heart is where the beauty of the human spirit comes alive. Without the heart, the human would be sinister. To be able to feel is the great gift. When you feel for someone, you become united with that person in an intimate way; your concern and compassion come alive, drawing some of the other person's world and spirit into yours. Feeling is the secret bridge that penetrates solitude and isolation. Without the ability to feel, friendship and love could never be born. All feeling is born in the heart. This makes the human heart the true jewel of the world. (adapted from John O'Donohue *Eternal Echoes*. Bantum.)

The state of one's heart inevitably shapes one's life; it is ultimately the place where everything is decided.

- A courageous heart will go forth and engage with life despite confusion and fear.
- A fearful heart will be hesitant and will tend to hold back.
- A heavy heart will make for a gloomy, un-lived life.
- But:
- A compassionate heart need never carry the burden of judgement.
- A forgiving heart knows the art of liberation.
- A loving heart awakens the spirit to possibility and engagement with others
- The power of the heart's attitude is expressed beautifully in the New Testament phrase: 'Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.'
- And all through the Old Testament, God is interested only in the heart- not sacrifices, rituals or rules - only the heart. Indeed, the mystical tradition would suggest that the heart is beautiful precisely because it is where God dwells: the heart is the divine sanctuary.

7. Prayers of the Community

- Open our hearts Lord, to those who are broken by this world's injustice, particularly children who have been damaged in any way.
Reply: Where your treasure is, there is your heart also
- Soften our hearts Lord, make us more human and capable of an ever-deeper love and the stories of brokenness of others lives. *Reply*
- Give us courageous hearts, Lord to stand patiently with those who are locked into anger and depression. *Reply*
- May our hearts be slowly liberated by genuine forgiveness and grace. *Reply*
- Draw this parish together as a community of faith supporting one another on the sometimes difficult pilgrimage of our lives. *Reply*

8. Concluding Song: Come back to me

9. Invite all present to offer a sign of peace to those around them.

10. Conclude with a cup of tea/coffee

Evaluation

The process that is described here guided the first of five meetings held over a period of a little over 12 months.

The numbers attracted to these meeting have been between 30 and 18.

The Parish Priest only facilitated the first meeting, Subsequent meetings were conducted by one of the parishioners.

There has been a general feeling of satisfaction that those present could discharge considerable of the burden they felt in what they saw as a 'safe place' ie. the local parish.

A number of those present expressed the need for an action plan that might include: going out to victims to assist them in some fashion; express their concern for greater transparency and accountability in the parish and in the Church at large; search out the underlying causes of clerical abuse.

Others were satisfied with the initial pastoral goals of the first meeting; ie to feel the support in the parish facing openly this crisis and having the opportunity of expressing their confusion, and the diminishment of their morale caused by these stories.

Pic: group