

Challenging Church traditions

Last week I met with a number of people who are challenging and confronting the traditional role and structure of the Church in our lives today. I am inspired by their work and encouraged by their determination to push Church boundaries to make the Church a better place for everyone.

Earlier in the week I went to the launch of Kieran Tapsell's new book *Potiphar's Wife: The Vatican's Secret and Child Sexual Abuse*. This highly controversial book argues that the cover-up of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church has been occurring since 1922 when Pope Pius XI imposed the 'secret of the holy office' on all information obtained through the Church's canonical investigations. If the State did not know about the crimes, the Church could treat them as a purely canonical crime to be dealt with secretly.

Mr Tapsell argues that the following five Popes continued the decree making Bishops powerless to appropriately report clerical sex abuse. I am looking forward to reading this book and getting a better understanding of the issues Mr Tapsell raises.

Later in the week I went to a talk by Fr James Alison at St Joseph's Catholic Church, Newtown in Sydney. Fr Alison is a highly regarded theologian living in South America. He has been instrumental in developing a positive understanding of gay matters in a Catholic context.

Fr Alison's refreshing understanding of the Gospel enlightened me. He spoke of grace, and God's action in our lives and explained that the Church is about enabling people to 'do life', not running a commentary on decisions you make in your life. Fr Alison emphasized that human flourishing is from where you are at, and that there is no need to change your nature to become fully alive.

From Sydney I went to Melbourne to meet with a support group 'In Good Faith' for people who have been abused by the Church. I was impressed with their advocacy work for survivors and their practical support caring for survivors and their needs and concerns.

In our discussions we spoke about the Council's reform agenda and the work we are doing preparing for the Royal Commission. It was great to receive the group's support for our work.

Last week I also spoke with the Parish Priest of St Mary Magdalene, Rose Bay, Fr Tony Doherty. I have been impressed with the work Fr Doherty and his Parish are doing in response to clerical sex abuse.

As stories of clerical sex abuse unfolded in the media Fr Doherty was increasingly angry and disillusioned. He wanted to give his parishioners an opportunity to talk openly about clerical sex abuse and how this was impacting on their faith and belief in the Church. This is a little of what Fr Doherty had to say.

"The scandal of clerical sex abuse was causing a dysfunctional split in my mind and I wondered if my parishioners felt the same way. To me, there was no pastoral issue more significant than how the Church was confronting clerical sex abuse.

"I talked with my colleagues and no one seemed to have any clear ideas on the best way to handle the issue. I was surprised some Priests weren't even going to discuss the issue with their Parishioners

Blog



“I had spoken about it from the pulpit, but it had not generated a great deal of discussion. I wanted to create a non-threatening environment where people could come together and unload their feelings, their anger, and their hurt.

“We placed a notice in the parish bulletin inviting people to talk and express their feeling about clerical sexual abuse. At the meeting music played in the background creating a relaxed atmosphere. I didn’t want the meetings to be a clerical sort of event. I wanted parishioners to own the meetings; with the freedom to express whatever emotions they felt like expressing.

“About 35 people participated in the first meeting. The conversations were helpful and people expressed their disappointment and hurt with the Church. In subsequent meetings people gave themselves the permission to be quite angry and critical of the cover-ups and how unprofessionally Priests and Bishops have handled this.

“Over the five meetings I believe parishioners felt they were in a safe place to unload the burden they felt. A number felt the need for an action group, while others were satisfied with the initial pastoral goals of the meetings.

“Two Parishes in Sydney and one in Adelaide are now running similar programs.

“The meetings have been helpful in our Parish, but I still worry that some Catholics will sweep the issue of clerical abuse under the carpet. I even found this attitude with some Priests.

“This is an old saying of mine, ‘we want to build an adult Church’. Adults don’t sweep things under the carpet and dismiss them; they look at them properly and respond in an appropriate manner.

“As an adult Church we have to acknowledge the frailty of the Church. Us Priests need to grow up a bit too. There is a great deal more pain to go through before proper healing can begin. “ **Fr Tony Doherty, Parish Priest, St Mary Magdalene, Rose Bay, Sydney.**

Last week the NSW Government released the Cunneen report into the actions of NSW Police and the Catholic Church in response to child sexual abuse perpetrated by two priests in the Maitland/Newcastle diocese.

The abuse was horrendous involving many young people over many years dating back from the late 1990s. While this inquiry is outside the terms of reference of the Truth Justice and Healing Council anything we can learn about abuse within the Church must be part of our thinking as we develop a reform agenda for the Catholic Church. The report, well over 800 pages in four volumes, has been reported on extensively over the weekend.

Church leaders and their advisors across Australia are closely reading the report. The Truth Justice and Healing Council will also take this report into consideration as we develop our responses to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Francis Sullivan

4 June 2014

www.tjhcouncil.org.au