

Making it happen

When Pope Francis celebrated mass and spoke privately with six survivors of sexual abuse in Rome last week it was an important symbolic gesture clearly demonstrating he places clerical sexual abuse at the very top of his agenda.

In his homily the Pope publically recognized the hurt and suffering people feel over the inaction of Church leadership. The Pope's comments are the strongest we have heard from the Vatican and they reinforce the position taken by the Australian Catholic Church as we go through the Royal Commission.

Survivors spoke very positively about their meeting with the Pope. Peter Saunders from the UK described his 'no limits, no intermediaries' meeting with the Pope as 'a life changing moment'.

Survivor advocacy groups were skeptical of the Pope's meeting with survivors calling it a publicity stunt and criticizing the Church for not being sincere and holding bishops to account. I understand this. The Church has a poor track record managing clerical sex abuse. My hope is that this meeting is seen as a genuine commitment to healing and change. The Pope now needs to back up his comments with real action and start the long and difficult process of reform.

Again, earlier this week, the Pope has sent a very clear message in his interview with the Italian newspaper, La Repubblica, that child sexual abuse within the church is a cancer that must be removed.

I think the Pope is making it clear his focus is not just on the perpetrators but also on the church leadership across the world and what they are doing to change the culture and responses to child sexual abuse. It is clear he is expecting a lot more from Church leaders than we have seen so far.

Earlier this week we had a meeting of the Truth Justice and Healing Council at the Mary MacKillop Centre in Sydney. It was the first with our new Chair, Neville Owen.

The meeting was productive and engaging, dare I say robust, with strong views expressed by all members of the Council around issues such as the development of the Church's approach to redress, oversight of child protection policies and civil litigation.

We also spent a lot of time talking about the need for action from church leaders and the imperative to move as soon as possible on reforms to Church policies and processes.

At times I wonder why governments, state and federal, have been slow to respond and establish national policies for the protection of children around issues such as working with children checks and child safe institutions.

Blog



All governments have a lot of skin in the game. Justice McClellan has already looked at some Government agencies and organisations that would, from the evidence given, seemed to have come up short in the way they have responded in a number of the case studies so far.

Like all other institutions, including the Catholic Church, governments have a responsibility to move when it becomes clear there is a significant problem. I don't think anyone could accept that the patchwork of child protection legislation we have across many different jurisdictions is in the best interests of children. It seems obvious the development of a nationally consistent approach to child protection policies should start now.

Francis Sullivan

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au