

Reforming the Church

Last week I spent time with parishioners at St Charles Borromeo Parish in Ryde.

St Charles Borromeo was a reformer during the Protestant Reformation. He played an important role reforming the Church during the Council of Trent in 1545. That spirit of reform is alive in his namesake parish.

More than 120 parishioners, including former NSW Deputy Premier, John Watkins, showed deep concern for how the Church is responding to child sex abuse. Their passion and commitment to the issue is clear. Their questions revealed a deep hurt and strong desire to care for survivors and reform the Church.

It is encouraging to see the priority given in this Parish to concerns about child sexual abuse. The organisers, those who gathered for the discussion and Parish Priest Father Paul Monkerud are clearly committed to raising the concerns of local Catholics and contributing to this important reform process.

They continue to voice their anger, to share their fears and frustration and to express their concerns.

This is not the first time St Charles Borromeo Parish has been at the forefront in discussing and raising concerns of child sex abuse in the Church. Not long after the Royal Commission was announced, the parish came together to discuss and brainstorm the clerical sex abuse crisis in the Church.

On another note, as I mentioned in last week's blog, the Archdiocese of Melbourne will be the focus of the next public hearing starting in Melbourne on Monday 18 August.

In discussions with many religious and community groups around Australia I have spoken often about *Towards Healing*, the Church's national victim reparation protocol. But I have not talked as much about the Melbourne Response, which is another reparation protocol used exclusively by the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

During the mid-1990s a committee of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia began the process of developing a national protocol – *Towards Healing*.

In 1996 then auxiliary bishop George Pell was appointed Archbishop of Melbourne and within 100 days of office he established the Melbourne Response. Archbishop Pell said there was an urgent need to put in place an effective system to respond to victims of abuse in his Archdiocese.

Some months after the Melbourne Response was announced, the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference announced the introduction of *Towards Healing*.

It might be useful to have a quick look at how the Melbourne Response works.

The Melbourne Response is used when allegations are made against a person who works or who has worked under the authority of the Melbourne Archdiocese. This includes any religious or layperson appointed by the Archbishop.

Anyone with complaints of abuse by priests, religious and laypersons under the authority of the Archbishop of Melbourne can contact an independent commissioner who will investigate claims and makes findings.

An independent counseling service is provided free of cost to survivors and their families for as long as necessary. Spiritual support and guidance is also available to individuals at a Parish level.

An independent panel decides on ex-gratia payments to survivors. There is a cap of \$75,000 on all ex gratia payments. In addition the Melbourne Response provides an uncapped pastoral package tailored to the needs of the person who has made the claim

Apart from the funding provided by the Archdiocese of Melbourne the Melbourne Response is independent of the Church.

Both the Melbourne Response and *Towards Healing* have strengths and weaknesses.

For some, the independence of the Melbourne Response is highly valued, while the emphasis on pastoral care in *Towards Healing* and having the Church leaders hear the story and apologise is helpful to others.

There is a lot to learn and a lot to gain from the hearings and our own research. We are not standing still waiting for an official report from the Royal Commission, we are doing what we can now to improve *Towards Healing* and enhance services for survivors.

The Melbourne Response will soon be the focus of the Royal Commission. How the Archdiocese of Melbourne responded to survivors of child sexual abuse will be forensically analyzed over a two-week period.

As we prepare for the start of the hearing our thoughts are with the survivors as they prepare to retell their painful stories.

We know from past hearings this is a difficult time for them and their families. It is our hope that their bravery and stoicism will help deepen our understanding of this complex issue and will help improve and reform protocols and processes so the Church and its many services are safer places for children.

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au