

Focusing on what matters; a US perspective

In my last post I mentioned meeting with Dr Kathleen McChesney, the Chair of the US National Advisory Council of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) and former Executive Director for the Office of Child Protection for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

I asked Dr McChesney to be our guest blogger this week and write about her 12 years assisting the Catholic Church in the US with its response to child clerical and religious sexual abuse, including the development of child protection protocols.

Travelling throughout the Eastern States of Australia and meeting many people addressing clerical sex abuse I am inspired by their dedication towards providing a pastoral response to survivors damaged by the Church. It is also reassuring to know that programs for the prevention of all types of abuse, including bullying, are becoming more prevalent in Catholic schools and ministries that serve youth.

Most of the leaders in the Catholic Church in the US have recently evolved in their thinking and acting about this issue too. Previously, many leaders treated the plight of victims/survivors as a "problem" for the Church, rather than recognizing that someone representing the Church caused the incalculable pain for these children and their families.

These horrific acts also created great distress among parishioners and devastated those clergy and lay persons who had always morally and charitably cared for, respected and nurtured children and young people.

The experience of the Catholic Church in Australia appears to be similar to the US, particularly the time period when most of the abuse occurred. Based on a study conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, it was found that Catholic priests or deacons had sexually abused over 10,000 boys and girls in the period between 1950 and 2002. Importantly, most of these offenses occurred in the 1970s, and the number of allegations has continued to drop in each succeeding decade.

Although there has not been a similar national study in Australia, data from the Catholic Church in Victoria prepared for the parliamentary inquiry in 2012 show that the 1970s were also the peak years in which these offenses occurred. Furthermore, the Victorian data shows a significant drop in the number of current complaints in all subsequent years. Between 2000 and 2012, there was one complaint reported.

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Agreeing to abide by a consistent set of guidelines, the US Catholic Bishops and religious superiors adopted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Using the Charter as the path forward since 2002, the number of allegations per year has diminished from an approximate average of 600 to 12. This accounting suggests that many of the preventative actions taken in the US have been effective and will continue to be so in years to come.

The Charter (guidelines) focuses on four important areas: response, prevention, accountability and transparency. Of these four areas, it is the response to victims/survivors and prevention that are the most important. Pastoral and other types of competent, professional care are offered to those who have suffered.

Preventing future abuse takes the form of mandatory educational programs for clergy, teachers, employees and volunteers who work with youth in Church settings and ministries. These individuals are also required to undergo "background checks" to ensure that they have no criminal record. Young people are required to take age-appropriate "safety classes" to assist them in recognizing the behavior of adults who might seek to harm them and empowering them to seek a trusted adult for assistance.

Accountability and transparency are essential elements of the US approach. External compliance audits, to ensure that all dioceses and religious institutes adhere to the elements of the Charter, are regularly compiled. Annual public reports regarding compliance, including the number of current complaints and those made about offenses that occurred in past years, are also prepared.

From what I have seen from my time in Australia, the US experience is similar to the type of change the Australia Catholic Church is working towards. I hope the Royal Commission continues to provide an opportunity to reflect on the past while focusing on the changes and reform package needed to make the Church a safer place for all children and young adults.

Dr Kathleen McChesney

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