

## **The culture of discretion - in conversation with Archbishop of Brisbane, Mark Coleridge**

Archbishop of Brisbane, Mark Coleridge was working in the Holy See's Secretariat of State from 1997-2002 when the *Boston Globe* revealed the appalling scandal and widespread impact of clerical sex abuse throughout the world. Pope John Paul II was forced to act and convened a meeting of the American Cardinals to address the issue and find a way forward.

Many working in the Vatican at the time had little knowledge of clerical sex abuse or experience in dealing with it. Archbishop Coleridge had a little more understanding than some, given he was in Melbourne in the 1980s and 90s as the first cases emerged. He was a Church spokesperson when the controversy began to rage. During his nearly five years in Rome and after returning to Australia to take up positions as the Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne and later Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Archbishop Coleridge grew to understand the devastating impact of clerical sex abuse.

In May 2010, when he was Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Archbishop Coleridge outlined his understanding of clerical sex abuse in a [Pentecost Letter](#) on sexual abuse of young people in the Catholic Church. He identified what he believed were cultural factors at work inside the Church and the inadequacies of the both the Church's legal and moral response to clerical sex abuse.

Archbishop Coleridge is a strong advocate for survivors and a valued council member of the Truth Justice and Healing Council.

Last month Archbishop Coleridge spoke with Scott Stephens on 'Conversations', ABC 702. It was an important, insightful and thought-provoking interview.

This week's blog is an extract from that interview, focusing on Archbishop Coleridge's insights and understanding of the clerical sex abuse scandal. To listen to the full interview [click here](#).

*Many good people in the Vatican were not in a position to ever meet a victim, or deal with abusive clergy. It's not until you have that kind of mud on your boots, or even spilled that kind of blood that you can understand what the crisis is. We were ill equipped to deal with it.*

*That was what was going on in the Vatican at the time.*

*The other thing to keep in mind is that Pope John Paul II, being a Pole, had been used to these kinds of allegations under the Communist regime as standard fare. They used to discredit clergy whom the regime didn't particularly favour or whom they wanted to hamstring.*

*And I think the Pope would have been instinctively suspicious of these sorts of allegations, precisely because of his Polish background and his experience with the Communist regime and their tactics.*

*But of course, it wasn't that kind of thing. Traditionally, the approach of the Holy See has been that the Bishops handle issues such as this locally. The Holy See intervenes only when it has got beyond the local people or when it becomes clear that they're mishandling it. By early 2002, it was clear that the issue was bigger than the Bishops could manage; they needed help. That's when Pope John Paul II convened a meeting of the American Cardinals to address clerical sex abuse in that country to try to find a way forward.*

# Blog

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*In early 2002, I didn't realise that what was going on in Boston was merely the tip of the iceberg. We didn't understand that this sexual abuse crisis was like a tsunami; it just kept coming. Back then, I didn't know as much about sexual abuse in the Church as I do now; and I'm embarrassed now by some of my misunderstandings and misspeaks in earlier times.*

During the interview, Archbishop Coleridge went on to explain and give some background information on the Pentecost Letter he wrote in 2010 when he was Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn.

*That Letter had come from 25 years of grappling with clerical sex abuse. What I very slowly came to see was that this wasn't just a matter of personal culpability on the part of those that had abused the young. There were institutional ramifications – in other words, a kind of communal culpability.*

*There were cultural factors at work to make it possible. Firstly, for the young to be abused; secondly, to make possible the serious mishandling of clerical sex abuse by men I knew personally to be good, decent, compassionate men.*

*And the question I couldn't avoid through those years was, How was it possible – in a Church which has so much good that something so evil could have happened? And how was it possible that good, decent and compassionate men, like these Bishops whom I knew, could have so seriously mishandled it?*

*I came to think there must be cultural factors at work, not just in Australia, because this was happening in different parts of the Catholic world. Cultural factors are not just cultural in a one-dimensional sense; they are also spiritual factors. Very often the factor at work was the dark side of the brighter things about the Church.*

*'The culture of discretion' was one of the things I mentioned in that Letter. In other words, there is a bright and charitable thing in not blurting out things I might know about you or anyone who happens to be listening. Certain discretion is commanded by charity, in all kinds of situations.*

*There are all sorts of things I know about people that I will take to my grave, and I must if charity is to prevail. That's the bright side.*

*The dark side is precisely what is now known as cover-up. That discretion turns dark, and therefore you don't go to the police...you don't do this, you don't do that.*

*Then there's forgiveness, which is probably the most essential thing in the life of the Church.*

*That's the bright side, the good news. The dark side, the bad news, is when you are prepared to overlook things that are criminal – things, we have discovered slowly but surely, that are incredibly destructive in the lives of people. These things can be dust under the rug in the name of forgiveness.*

*Our credibility is in tatters, I mean primarily the Bishops, and we have a massive task to rebuild trust. It's not a matter of spin; it's a matter of being and doing what we are supposed to be and do beyond the betrayals. The first thing we have to do is fess up.*

*I keep saying to people that there's no way around it: the only way out is through. It's like running a marathon. You can't go under it, over it or around it; you have to go through, and that is very painful.*

*The Royal Commission is a gift, it's a kind of searing, scouring gift, but it is a gift.*