

Putting People First

I was speaking recently with a survivor of child sex abuse about his experiences and the difficult process of dealing with the Church.

Growing up in a Catholic family he recalled happy days piling into the station wagon on a Sunday morning to attend mass. The Parish Priest was highly respected; friendly and a regular visitor to his home, often sharing the family's Sunday roast. Unbeknown to the family the Priest was using these opportunities to abuse this young boy, damaging his life and devastating the tightknit family.

It took some time for the boy to tell his family about the abuse, and then finally approach the Church. The sense of betrayal was profound and made worse by the lukewarm response from the Church couched in tones of disbelief and skepticism. Years of depression and despair followed and the young man and his entire family felt isolated and abandoned.

You can imagine the relief this person felt with the announcement of the Royal Commission. Finally his story, and that of so many like him, could be heard, believed and pursued.

After enduring the agony of abuse, survivors have high expectations that the Royal Commission will care for survivors and deliver fair and just outcomes. I certainly hope this is the case too.

The Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) is working at all levels of the Church to help ensure the Church's approach is transparent and honest and to ensure the Church co-operates fully with the Royal Commission.

We will continue to advocate for changes that put the needs of survivors first and contribute to the public debate in critical areas, particularly on civil litigation and redress.

I know this has not always been the approach of the Catholic Church. In the past, the first instinct of Church administrators and leaders was to protect the Church, making them suspicious of people coming forward with allegations of sex abuse. Too often a 'siege mentality' was adopted and not an openness to the truth. Too often survivors were left disillusioned and confused about where they stood after revealing their story.

This week the Royal Commission will release its options paper of redress and civil litigation. It will set out options on redress and civil litigation reforms and invite responses on the options. The paper comes ahead of the scheduled release of recommendations from the Royal Commission of a redress scheme mid-year.

Blog

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The release of this paper is a major milestone for the Royal Commission and goes to the heart of its work. For two years now we have watched as the Royal Commission has looked back, and in its own words born witness to the abuse of children in many different institutions.

Now the Royal Commission is firmly focused on the future – how should survivors be treated, both financially and with practical support by the institutions in which they were abused and how, if a survivor goes to Court, the legal system should deal with these cases.

As I say, the Royal Commission is bearing witness to these miserable experiences. It is now incumbent on all institutions, including the Catholic Church, to reassess the process and procedures we adopt when engaging with survivors who come forward with allegations.

To support survivors in telling their story it is helpful to follow this simple rule. Rather than adopting an attitude of suspicion, we should begin by believing the person and working with them to corroborate their story.

This is truly what it means to put people first.

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au