

CRA National Assembly, hope for the future

23 June 2016

This week I had the honour once again of addressing Catholic Religious Australia's annual national assembly. This is a meeting of Australia's leaders of religious institutes, congregations and societies. There are 189 in all.

CRA's leadership has been at the forefront with the Catholic bishops in overseeing the work of our Council. Their unwavering support has been vital to the work of the Council.

Many of the religious leaders have been part of the seismic changes the Church has put in place over the last 20 years to better address child sexual abuse cases. The establishment of *Towards Healing*, the Encompass treatment program and the Integrity in Ministry protocol have all been driven by religious leaders determined to change the culture within the Church and its organisations.

It has been an essential, if very difficult path.

As I have indicated in previous blogs it is this story of reform and innovation that now needs greater attention.

The miserable history of child sexual abuse in the Church is now almost common knowledge. The failures to report abusers, the institutional defensiveness and the gross abuse of institutional power are plain for all to see.

But what is crucial to understand is that changes were introduced by Church leaders. These changes have even been replicated in other countries and despite the fact that they have worked well most of the time, the religious leaders have adopted a continuous improvement approach and introduced reforms across the years.

What I found so encouraging at the CRA conference was the openness and resolve by participants to embrace more change. They recognise the need for even more rigorous professional standards and formation.

They are working on new guidelines for support and supervision of people living vowed religious life. They are establishing best practice church structures for vital ministries in health, education and social services.

As always the leaders of religious congregations are setting new pathways for the Church in general and pointing to new expressions for the works they have championed for so long.

And amongst all this is the ever present challenge of confronting the shame of the abuse perpetrated within the Church.

Even though there has been a Church-based redress scheme for the last 20 years, the leaders are clear that the country needs an independent system of redress so that all victims can access financial and pastoral support.

Time is of the essence. All that is lacking is the political momentum. We have heard the sounds of silence from the Federal Government and a number of states have refused to participate in a national scheme. But there have been some recent hopeful signs from within the bureaucracy that just possibly the serious work is beginning.

With the Federal Election out of the way by July, so too will be any barriers to the establishment of a national scheme. I for one, look forward to working with the Federal Government, relevant departments and interested groups to get this show on the road.

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