

Let's start talking

Francis Sullivan 23 March 2017

Since the Royal Commission's final hearing of the Catholic Church I have been regularly asked about where to from here. At one level the answer is straight forward. We will need to wait on the findings of the Commission and then move into implementation mode. Exactly how that is undertaken will be a preoccupation of the church leadership.

At a more immediate level the revelations and ramifications of the Commission's case studies need to be processed by the Catholic community. There is considerable widespread disenchantment and deep sadness within the faithful. The extent of the abuse scandal has rocked the confidence and trust of ordinary Catholics. A concerted process of dialogue and discernment is required to begin now, not later.

So much has been said and so many opinions have been expressed that exactions range from anger to confusion. Church leaders have been exposed to public scrutiny at unprecedented levels. Their performances have varied. But now they need to help lead the Catholic community to come to terms with the scandal.

In the first instance this means providing opportunities for local diocesan gatherings where people can express their reactions and know that they are being heard and understood. It means providing liturgical expressions of lament and healing for survivors and their families. It means pastoral planning where a needs based model of inquiry motivates and shapes the resourcing of diocesan and parish life.

This is not to say that activities such as these have not be held before. But it is safe to assume that they have not been held across the Church in a concerted way in the wake of the abuse scandal. Many parishioners express frustration that clerical sexual abuse is not spoken about in their parishes nor is it addressed more broadly in diocesan sponsored events. The time for open discussion and honest, mutual decision making has well and truly arrived.

This week on the ABC's new radio program, *God Forbid*, Kristina Keneally and Monica Doumit shared an hour long discussion on contemporary Catholic issues, one of which was the child abuse scandal.

Their conversation was not only stimulating, but hopeful. I thought it demonstrated what could happen at local Church levels when dialogue is well facilitated and where people are prepared to discuss issues in a respectful and considered fashion.

One of the glaring revelations in almost all the case studies involving the Church was that the decisions and considerations on how to deal with child abuse cases were kept to a limited few insiders, most often clerics only.

If nothing else we need to involve the collected wisdom of the Catholic community now in beginning to shape the type of Church experience we all want coming out of this Royal Commission and the lessons it has for us.