

Convicted priest child sexual abuser speaks of abuse of power

Francis Sullivan 26 July 2017

Just recently I saw an interview in the National Catholic Reporter of a convicted priest child sexual abuser, Gilbert Gustafson. He had pleaded guilty to abusing a minor in 1983 and served four and a half years in gaol. The interview outlines his personal journey, very frankly, through the seminary and early priesthood.

He makes no excuses neither does he pull any punches about himself, his obligation to take responsibility for his actions and the need for broader Church reform.

It is in this last area that I found very strong resonances with our work here at TJHC.

Near the end of his interview Gustafson was asked what he thought the Church needed to learn from the abuse scandal. It was noteworthy that he didn't try to shift any responsibility from himself but rather saw himself as part of a broader cultural problem in the Church.

Gustafson said that the Church needed to subject itself to external accountability. In other words to shift from an attitude that the Church is somehow beyond or apart from the wider civil society and all its obligations. The Church can't be a law unto itself. It needs to be a good and proper corporate and civil citizen.

This has been and remains the position of our Council. Where the law obliges the reporting of child sexual assault, it must be followed. And where it doesn't our sense of moral responsibility should demand it.

Gustafson went on to say that church leaders need to fully accept the consequences of the abuse within their ranks. In other words, they need to ensure that the Church fully atones for the sins of abuse, and for the complicity of the cover ups.

And this means taking a conscious decision not to become legalistic, defensive and obstructionist in the courts. Let the truth be revealed and take action accordingly.

A third point he made was about culture. Over the years he has learnt about the adverse impact of the patriarchal models of power, clericalism, elitism and entitlement that have underpinned the system of complicity and concealment within the scandal of abuse. This is very similar to the TLHC's final submission to the Royal Commission in Case Study 50.

All sexual abuse is an abuse of power.

Not only are victims the subject of manipulation and domination of another, they are also vulnerable to the self interest of the institution. Until our Church gets that, we can never truly rid ourselves of the underlying causes of how this scandal was handled.

If nothing else comes from the Gustafson interview than the articulation of these few lessons, then we would do well to do more than just heed them.