

Taking Sides

Council member Maria Harries reflects on her decision to join the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, her commitment to the Church and the trust placed in her to “carry the voices” of those who have suffered.

When I accepted the invitation to join the Truth, Justice and Healing Council this year, I pondered the significance of the forty years of work behind me. During this time I have worked with and alongside women and men, children and young people, who have experienced terrible abuse of all forms at the hands of people who they trusted and who they should have been justified in trusting. Most importantly, on my shoulders sit the men and women members of the Alliance of Forgotten Australians (AFA) – all of whom have experienced abuse ‘in care’.

I wondered about how my joining the Council might be helpful or unhelpful, discussed this with the CEO, Francis Sullivan, and, importantly, asked some of the people with whom I still work, what it might mean to them if I joined the Council. All of the men and women with whom I had this difficult discussion have been victims; most would call themselves survivors and some, have also been perpetrators of abuse.

The answer to my question? Most people said it would be really important that I carry their voice into the Catholic Church arena; some said, they would need to think carefully because I had to be on one side or the other; a few said, I would need to decide whose side I was on! A couple said I was a traitor well expressed in the sentiment of one, “this is a war”. I wondered what this disparity meant. There are so many ‘sides’ captured in the one truth of each of these wonderful people.

So, it is with a sense of gratitude that I thank those who trust me to carry their story; with hope that I can reassure those who still wonder if I can do this with integrity or who have no faith in the process; and with an ever growing and deep conviction that the Church, of which I am a faithful member, is listening.

Whose side am I on? It seems trite to say, I am on the side of truth, justice and healing – but that is indeed the case. There are many before us who have travelled this journey of truth, justice and reconciliation. I was born and reared in Africa – a country steeped in the urgent need for healing and the crucible of so much of our learning about truth commissions. I was blessed to have Catholic parents there who were profoundly active in the world of racial justice and who, to their cost, relentlessly ‘spoke truth to power’. ‘Unspeakable truths’ must be aired and in their airing is the only hope we have of finding peace.

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I have no doubt that this Council is honorably on the path of this truth. I was alerted to the importance of this as I recorded the instant response of one of our bishops at the last meeting when he said. “the most important matter is the centrality of the welfare of the children”. As we lift the lid of silence and provide the records from the past, my prayer is we hold sacredly the pains of past hurt that heal and contribute to new ways for communities to care well for children and young people – indeed, all people.

Maria Harries

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<http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/>