

Barry O'Keefe remembered and revered

I am writing my blog from Perth this week where the Royal Commission is holding a public inquiry into Christian Brother institutions in Western Australia.

Listening to the men describe their childhood riddled with abuse, pain and neglect, is absolutely appalling. As the survivors spoke, I imagined them as young boys, already saddened by the loss of their parents, so far from home, when they were further harmed and exploited. It was simply unforgiveable.

The very nature of this particular hearing, and our sadness in mourning the loss and support of the Chair of the Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC), the Honourable Barry O'Keefe AM QC, who passed away last week, makes this hearing even more difficult to fathom and challenging to find a way forward.

To honour Mr O'Keefe and continue his devotion and commitment to the survivors of child sexual abuse within the Church we must truly listen to these brave survivors and support them in every way. We also need to continue to establish guidelines and reform agendas so that children are safe in all Catholic institutions.

Mr O'Keefe was appointed inaugural Chair of the TJHC in late 2012 and for the past 18 months has worked tirelessly to chart a path for reform within the Catholic Church.

Sometimes referred to as the 'mild one' (when comparing him to his 'wild one' rock star brother, the late Johnny O'Keefe), Barry O'Keefe was anything but mild in his commitment to and support of survivors of child sex abuse within the Church.

The first question Mr O'Keefe always asked when any issues were being discussed within the Council was 'what is the best interest of survivors?' This will remain the driving ethos for the Council and Mr O'Keefe's lasting legacy.

Mr O'Keefe was an inspiration and friend. His formidable intellect, deep faith, courage and leadership will be sorely missed. His reassuring and supportive leadership style gave us the confidence and empowered us to do the job. His determination that the Church be open, upfront and would fess up to the past was, and still remains, our guiding light through the Royal Commission.

Our prayers and thoughts are with his wife, Jan, and their three sons and two daughters. May he rest in peace.

The hearing into the Christian Brothers institutions in Western Australia will continue until the end of next week. The experiences of men who were residents at four Christian Brother institutions from 1947-1968 will be discussed. The response of the Christian Brothers when abuse allegations were raised, and the survivors' experiences with *Towards Healing*, will also be examined.

Blog



These are horrifying stories and many Catholics will feel great shame. It is only natural many people will question their association and relationship with the Church.

At this time we must remain committed to fully engage with the Royal Commission and channel Mr O'Keefe's motivation and dedication and unravel the very best of the Church to assist the very worst of the Church. We need to care for and support survivors in every way, and continue developing our reform agenda to ensure children are safe in our Church.

There is no doubt this is a difficult time and we must work harder to make it less difficult for survivors. These stories must be told and the truth revealed, so there are no more cover-ups and the Church can continue to make amends.

Francis Sullivan

30 April 2014

www.tjhcouncil.org.au