

Ballarat wrap up

It's been a heavy couple of weeks in Ballarat.

The Royal Commission hearing has rightly brought to the surface more evidence of the deep and lasting impact of the terrible crimes committed there against children by clergy in past decades.

It has also exposed, yet again, the inadequate response of the Church to allegations of child sexual abuse from the 1950s.

The Royal Commission heard evidence from convicted paedophile and former priest, Gerald Ridsdale, who is serving a lengthy jail sentence for crimes committed against some of the most vulnerable children in Ballarat and in rural and regional parishes in the Diocese in the 1960s 70s and 80s.

His memory lapses were frustrating and counterproductive. His evidence provided a picture of a man who acted out of self-interest seeking self-gratification with little, if any insight into the impact of his crimes on his victims.

But most shockingly, we heard evidence that the predominant response of the church in previous decades was to protect the reputation of the Church and the offenders without regard to the children who were abused.

The Ballarat hearing raised more questions than it answered.

Some of those questions relate to Cardinal Pell and his time as a priest in Ballarat.

In line with previous commitments, Cardinal Pell will return from Rome to provide evidence when the hearing resumes towards the end of this year.

The question of the Cardinal's participation in the Ballarat hearing has been the subject of much speculation in recent days, culminating, perhaps in 60 Minutes on Sunday night when Peter Saunders, a member of the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors called for the Cardinal to step aside in the face of allegations.

Cardinal Pell is a well-known public face of the Catholic Church in Australia – a lightning-rod if you like and a target because of his strong conservative views.

He's been a muscular defendant of the Church at a number of levels on many issues. He can be gruff, and what he feels personally, we don't often hear.

Blog



That said, his 'can-do' attitude did deliver the Melbourne Response complaints handling system. He has been a strong supporter of our Council's approach in this Royal Commission.

In his appearances before the Royal Commission so far, Cardinal Pell has apologised, he's admitted mistakes. He said the way John Ellis was treated was 'not Christian'.

Now that the Royal Commission has made it clear the Cardinal will be called as a witness, he, like any other others called, will have an opportunity to explain his role as a priest in Ballarat during his time there.

There are questions around what he did and didn't know, and what he did or didn't do.

He will have the opportunity to explain all this rather than negotiate the media frenzy that has surrounded this issue.

These are very difficult and frustrating times for survivors, their families, and their communities. And they're challenging times for the Church as it's called to account not only here in Australia, but internationally.

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