

The Melbourne hearing

Francis Sullivan, December 3, 2015

We are right in the middle of the latest public hearing of the child sex abuse Royal Commission. The examination of paedophile priests in the Melbourne Archdiocese has almost finished and next week abuse in the Ballarat Diocese will come under the microscope.

Two weeks into the hearings and there is a strange sense that the constant stream of abuse stories and maladministration by Church officials is becoming "old news"! Even seasoned journalists, like David Marr, have written of the sense of public fatigue that now surrounds the hearings.

Public coverage has changed with stories about the hearings now appearing well towards the back of the news sections in the papers, little or no coverage on the nightly TV news bulletins and the occasional piece on 7.30 or Lateline. It seems the ABC radio news and current affairs programs along with The Australian consistently file stories outside the online platforms.

Maybe this fatigue is understandable but clearly the disregard for the history of abuse is not.

Sitting in the hearings and listening to victims tell their stories is harrowing, not only for the victims but for those who are here to bear witness to those tragic histories. They are brave people.

Our community owes them so much because through the telling of these stories the scope and depth of abuse, cover ups and mishandling by officials has come to the fore. No longer a 'Catholic issue' only, institutional sex abuse has been a contagion.

So too has been the begrudging acceptance of incompetency, corruption and aggressive defensiveness on the part of the institutions.

In this hearing a number of victims have made statements that spoke volumes about the essence of this scandal. One woman spoke of her abuse at the hands of Fr Peter Searson, a man who has been described variously during this hearing as psychotic, mad and evil.

She struggled to describe the horror of her experience. In doing so she suffered chronically from years of self-doubt, depression and broken relationships. She also spoke of how she has been able to get on her feet, restore her life and enter into a happy marriage and have children. At the end of her statement she proudly stated her name, Julie Stewart. A strong person, proud of where she has arrived in life despite the might of resistance she had experienced in her determination to get justice.

Her story was replicated in many ways by another man who appeared before the Commission under a pseudonym. He too described being abused on numerous occasions by 'Bill' Baker, initially as a pre-pubescent altar boy. Even after nearly 40 years this man was deeply upset and clearly found speaking about the abuse extremely difficult. He is a courageous and determined person. Sadly he commenced his statement by saying that he had chosen to be known by a pseudonym because "I was too ashamed to use my name"! He did himself proud that day!

The devastating irony of these two stories struck me strongly. Both people have struggled so profoundly with issues of identity, self-belief and a sense of worth. They are victims of a Church that preaches the intrinsic dignity of every person. Yet they have had to get back a sense of their own dignity and personal value by finding nurture and support away from the Church.

During one of the hearing days this week, the Archbishop of Melbourne, Denis Heart was questioned extensively about how his predecessors, the Archbishop of the time, his vicar-generals, other bishops and advisors, responded to allegations by Julie Stewart and others against seven priests who, between them had abused possibly hundreds of children in Melbourne's outer western suburbs.

Archbishop Hart described the 'ad hoc' approach taken to complaints at the time as 'wholly inadequate' and that none of the cases before the Commission 'were properly investigated'. This, he agreed was 'a terrible failure'.

He accepted that the response of church leaders had often been inadequate and had often left children in danger. He also accepted that church leaders had failed to act on credible information about criminal abuse by priests.

And so it has come to this. A Church dragged into the public forum by the bravery and determination of vulnerable people. A Church admitting failures and moral shortcomings under compulsion, at times too slowly, and often without enough remorse or sense of responsibility.

All this in the name of the Church!

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