

Ballarat hearing finishes

Francis Sullivan, December 17, 2015

Sometimes words just are not enough!

At the end of another confronting and shameful public hearing for the Catholic Church the heavy sense of failure pervades our community. It is becoming an all-too-predictable scenario, in that in every case study ineptitude, maladministration, cover ups and corrupt practices have been revealed.

This miserable history cannot be denied, nor can it be rationalised away. The very fact that a faith-based institution would perpetuate such evil is incomprehensible. But it has – and now the time for reckoning has well and truly arrived.

As witness after witness fronts the Royal Commission the pretence falls away. At times the Commission's patience is clearly tested but at least the stark realities are made plain for all to see.

Of course the Ballarat component of these past three and a bit weeks of hearings is only partially completed. It will reconvene again in the New Year in Ballarat. Cardinal Pell will also be required to give his evidence, health permitting. This will be a crucial component and has already been eagerly awaited.

Already this hearing has heard from Bishop Peter Connors about the way bishops and officials made decisions over the movement of priests and the management of abusers. His evidence came on top of Archbishop Denis Hart's frank description of diocesan administrative and canonical processes. Both appearances added a great deal to the understandings of Church decision making in the 1980s and 1990s.

Bishop Brian Finnigan's evidence was focused primarily on his time as secretary and vicar general in Ballarat during the years when paedophile priests Gerald Ridsdale and Paul David Ryan ran rampant across the Diocese. Bishop Finnigan faced intense questioning and at one point was challenged about his credibility and compassion.

I have said many times it is incumbent on all church leaders appearing before the Commission to be open, transparent and honest. To explain what they knew and what they did, as best they can.

While Bishop Finnigan told the Commission this is what he tried to do, it was obvious that it was not well received.

With this coming on top of the decision by Cardinal Pell not to attend the hearing on the advice of his doctors, we finished up with an almost palpable anger in the hearing room which I have never felt so strongly before.

Many have said that this Royal Commission is vitally important for the future of the Catholic Church in Australia. Quite clearly the Church has not been able to be as honest with itself as it has had to be in these hearings. Now the challenge is to explain why this tragic scandal occurred and how it can be prevented from ever happening again.