

Rebuilding trust will be a long hard road

Francis Sullivan, 17 February 2016

The debate around the appearance of Cardinal Pell by video link at the Royal Commission in a week or so continues to rage and I see that a number of survivors from Melbourne and Ballarat are thinking about making the trip to Rome to hear the Cardinal's evidence.

While I have said previously it would have been preferable for the Cardinal to give his evidence in person to the Commission, as he did during the John Ellis hearing in March 2014, the fact that his health won't allow this should not be seen in any way as the Church thumbing its nose at the Commission or at survivors.

As far as the Catholic Church in Australia is concerned, we have been cooperating as best we possibly can, at many, many levels, with the Commission. Nothing we have that the Commission has asked for has been withheld and no one the Commission has wanted to speak to has not been available.

We are the single largest institution the Commission has dealt with. We have been the subject of more public hearings into different parts of the Church than any other organisation or institution and well over a third of the private sessions so far have related to the Catholic Church.

And while many will rightfully say this is nothing more than a factor of the breadth of abuse within the Church over many years it does require an enormous amount of work to ensure the Commission has all it wants to be confident everything is on the table.

Since the Commission's public hearings started in 2013 we have provided hundreds of thousands of documents, statements and other material. And while not wanting to put words into the Commission's mouth I don't think it would have any substantial complaint with the way in which we have engaged with it over the past three or so years.

On top of this we are also working with the Commission on a major project that will see an unprecedented amount of data relating to child sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests and religious collected and provided to the Commission. This will become publically available when completed. I don't think any other institution is doing anything similar.

We have also done a mountain of public policy work around issues relating to child safety which the Commission has identified through its 'Issues Papers' process.

I think it is safe to say we are among just a hand full of organisations that have made submissions to all ten papers ranging across topics such as the risk of child sexual abuse in schools, police and prosecution responses to abuse survivors, crime compensation schemes, Out-of-Home Care, redress schemes and civil litigation.

Despite this, and much more, there is a palpable, broad-based doubt that we are not fully on-board with the Commission. I think there is little doubt this can be sheeted home to one fundamentally, dominant factor: the loss of trust in the Catholic Church which is now seared into the frontal lobes of most people's minds.

I'm confident it will take more than a Royal Commission for trust in the Church to be broadly rebuilt, despite the continuing strong commitment across the community to Catholic health, welfare and education services.

It will probably take another generation because when you have an institution like the Church breaking its most fundamental of trusts – the care of the children and the vulnerable – people just say the hypocrisy is too hard to swallow.

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