

As the rubber hits the road....

16 June 2016

It is now some weeks since Pope Francis announced plans to make bishops accountable for grave neglect in the area of child safety. This came on the back of a previous pledge where he proposed a penal tribunal be established for a similar purpose. The latter has not seen the light of day, probably due to Vatican politics.

So now we have this new endeavour to instil accountabilities on the performance of bishops in carrying out their responsibilities. If nothing else this shows the Pope is serious about bringing bishops to account.

It also shows how difficult it is to get real change within the Vatican culture. A culture too often driven by clerical protectionism.

'And let's be straight, for decades this same culture permeated the handling of clerical child sex abuse here as well. It seems that not only did many clerical officials protect the interests of the institution, their responses either deliberately or by extension, ensured the likelihood of them being held in any way personally responsible would always be very difficult to establish.

As we have seen, the Royal Commission has now heard from many other institutions where corporate self-interest and the preservation of individual careers shaped the handling of abuse cases. This phenomenon does not appear to be specific to any institution, be it a church or a government agency.

Little wonder that victims and their advocates want an independent system of redress set up so that all the institutions in which sex abuse has occurred are held to account, regardless of their reputation or who was involved.

I think this flags a particularly important point.

When the Royal Commission started there was a widespread perception that it was an inquiry into the Catholic Church. Probably the media attention of scandals in the Church fed into that perception. That said, the Church's history certainly warranted such an inquiry and now it is obvious that so many other institutions and government agencies did as well.

And this is the rub.

The scandal of the sexual abuse of children has been revealed across institutions of all types, sizes and make up. This isn't church spin; it is a clear unequivocal fact demonstrated with monotonous regularity over the past three and half years as secular and government organisations have come before the Royal Commission.

What is it about institutional culture and the corporate mentality that so consistently, regardless of the setting, sought to advance the interests of the organisation against those of victims?

Even more troubling is why is it that when institutions that had a clearly articulated corporate mission, based on agreed values and attitudes such as respect and honesty, did they act in a way that made a mockery of their stated ethos and purpose?

These are troubling questions and should be exercising anyone in a position of authority and responsibility in these institutions. I know that they are the focus of attention for our Church leaders and Council at present. They are certainly on the Royal Commissioners' agenda as they begin to wrap up their public hearings program over the next half year.

We all need answers to these questions because like so many other Catholics, having to face the shame of my Church's miserable history of hypocrisy cries out for some straight talking and serious navel gazing.

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