

A community of Friars walking together on a spiritual path

Francis Sullivan, 6 July 2016

This week I had the pleasure of addressing the mid-term assembly of the Capuchin Friars held at Baulkham Hills. Men from ministries in all parts of the world attended.

Like so many others they were heartsick with the reality of the clerical abuse scandal and the shame it has brought on all of us in the Church. At the same time there was a realistic hope that positive changes to Church procedures, processes and culture can come.

Being amongst this exclusively male, celibate group where dedication to a spiritual way of living and service to others are at the forefront of their lives was very inspiring. Even more so when at least half of those present had lived this commitment for well over 40 years!

They have travelled the pathway of dedicated clerical service, with its highs and lows. And yet they too feel stigmatised by the actions of priest perpetrators and are not immune to the innuendo and at times vitriol that swirls around the public discourse.

It speaks volumes for the degree of public outrage that even though the number of priests and religious that have abused children is low in relative terms, the very fact that there were clerical abusers completely undermines the concept of the priesthood for many people. And while many of the victims and survivors of the abuse have suffered lifetimes of torment today's priests and religious bear, for the most part in silence, the collateral damage.

Even though it was not raised at this meeting the damage to priests and religious goes as far as for some to be wrongfully accused or to become the subject of mistaken identity.

This is an aspect of the scandal that has had little attention but it is a reality, especially when damaged memories and faulty recall are involved. In the current climate it is a reality that is being lived silently, albeit not without its own suffering.

I presume that the royal commissioners have likewise come across similar instances throughout the course of their inquiry. We all need to register the

scope of the damage that abuse and its cover up has rendered on our community.

Beyond that though being in such a 'priestly' environment I was struck by its overt lack of clericalism. There was no sense of authoritative rule, or even a 'pecking order' of importance. I didn't feel anything but a sense of inclusiveness and welcome for myself and for those within the fraternity. In other words, they were a community where collaboration and respect rules.

Often critics of the Church's culture highlight clericalism as being one of the factors that perpetuated the abuse scandal. They pinpoint the abuse of power by some in positions of responsibility, their propensity to safeguard the interests of the 'system' before the rights of those who work and live in it and the willingness to choose their personal advancement rather than challenge any misguided sense of loyalty to the Church, religious congregation or diocese.

In short, it is the very antithesis of a priestly and religious vocation and gospel values.

If nothing else the sex abuse scandal has raised the awareness of the perils of clericalism, the defensiveness for the Church and the exclusive nature of decision making within clerical environments.

A conversation around all this has already been underway in the Church and it holds the hope of producing more transparent and accountable procedures, better collaboration and far more effective engagement with the laity in the daily workings of the institutional Church.

As I have mentioned before, the Royal Commission is now very much in its 'wrap up' phase. It is increasingly exploring why institutions handled the scandal the way they did. Understanding the complexities of historical sex abuse cases is central to that investigation.