

## **A picture is worth a thousand words – the importance of photos, birth certificates and other records to people who grew up in orphanages, missions, children’s homes and foster care**

Over the past almost four years, as the Royal Commission has explored the way the Catholic Church and other institutions have responded to child sexual abuse one of the key issues I hear from survivors is the difficulty they have trying to get hold of their personal records.

This is particularly true if they were in foster care, orphanages, children’s homes, missions and other child residential care facilities and unfortunately it seems to be particularly true if the institution was run by the Catholic Church.

Most of us have family photo books, if we put in just a little effort we can scrape together a ‘family tree’ of sorts. Indeed most of us can pick up a phone and call a relative, a parent, a sibling, a cousin. We have a family history that we can reference and, in part, can tell us why we are who we are.

This is not the case for many kids who were brought up in orphanages, children’s homes, missions and foster care last century or as they are known, Care Leavers. Many know nothing about their parents, if they have brothers and sisters, or even where they came from.

Imagine going through life having no understanding or appreciation of your roots. Nothing to hold on to, to provide an anchor linking you back to a time and place. We are our history and when we have no understanding of it, I’m told it is like being rudderless, a compass with a needle that just spins round and round.

Recently I was told about a 57-year-old Care Leaver who has never met his parents, any of his five siblings or for that matter seen a photo of them.

He needs his records so he can find his family and find himself, to try to understand why he is different in many ways to his peers. He needs the records to try to make sense of his childhood and to give himself a sense of ‘family’ and an understanding of the ‘why?’ questions in his life.

Having these records is also an important part of abuse survivors being able to tell their stories to the Royal Commission – something all our Church leaders are on the record fully supporting.

But when they ask an institution for their records they hit many a brick wall, many are met with hostility and frustration, delays and excessive costs. And if they are provided with some records they are often so heavily redacted they are next to useless.

To these care leavers, it looks and feels like these same institutions are continuing to put their reputations ahead of the welfare of their former residents. For some it feels like the institution is all too willing to continue to abuse them.

For the life of me I can’t understand why some Catholic organisations in which young kids lived, were cared for or were educated wouldn’t do all they can to help them understand their family history.

If for no other reason – and there are many other reasons – it would put them on the right side of the issue.

Certainly in the past 15 years or so, many Catholic organisations have done a lot to make sure care leavers get better access to their records. But some still have a long way to go.

I'm often asked at the parish meetings I attend and in other places what it is we as Catholics can do to help abuse survivors?

Well here is one simple project – if you have any influence over your local school, parish or any other place where there might be some historical records then let them know these past records should be available, and easily available, to now grown adults.

Many do, but everyone in any institution needs to understand and respect the value of these precious documents, for many they provide the only glimpse into their history. And while these records will sometimes deliver pain and very mixed emotions they are vital in piecing together shattered lives.

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