

Royal Commission Case Study 50

Catholic Church Final Hearing



Monday 13 February 2017 – Day 6

The Commission started day 6 of Case Study 50 with a panel examination of the processes of priestly formation within the Catholic Church both historically and currently.

The panel consisted of Dr David Ranson, Vicar General, Diocese of Broken Bay and Parish Priest at Wahroonga; Dr Christopher Geraghty, former judge, priest and seminary lecturer in theology; Auxiliary Bishop Anthony Randazzo, former rector Holy Spirit Seminary Banyo (Qld); and Dr John Chalmers, Director of Mission and Formation, Centacare Brisbane.

Dr Geraghty told the Commission he had entered the seminary at the age of twelve in 1951, and left after ordination at 24. He was sent to a parish in Cronulla in southern Sydney, where he was 'left on his own with no support'.

He said while in the seminary he received no instruction on celibacy. Asked if he had struggled with celibacy as a priest he told the Commission that after the Second Vatican Council, 'I got depressed...lonely...isolated and in that sense I was struggling with celibacy'.

Bishop Randazzo told the Commission that his experience in the seminary in the late 1980s and early 1990s had been very different. He said had received instruction on celibacy during formation, including regular instruction on personal development.

'For me in the seminary celibacy was not presented as a series of "you can't". My experience was about seeking out life-giving relationships in your own life' he said.

Dr Ranson said in the 1990s screening and assessment of candidates for seminary life was in place, including psychological assessment.

He said however that ongoing formation of clergy after ordination, while available in many dioceses, needed to be more 'systemic'. He suggested a shorter initial formation period, followed by clergy regularly withdrawing from ministry for a few months to undertake further formation as part of a 'continuous adventure of learning' may be a preferred approach.

Dr Geraghty told the Commission that while lecturing during the 1970s, he was involved in assessment at the Springwood seminary, but had been forbidden to talk to students about sex or celibacy. He agreed with Commissioner McClellan that, broadly speaking, the church had failed to understand the personality of people commencing training and failed to have appropriately trained staff involved in formation.

Bishop Randazzo acknowledged there were aspects of formation in the past which 'were not as good as they should have been'. In response to questions from the Commissioners he told the Commission that clericalism at any level was unhealthy and had been a factor leading to abuse within the church. Dr Ranson agreed, saying past formation and seminarian systems had been a 'distortion' and that there needed to be a public recognition of past failings before the church would be able to move on.

There was broad ranging discussion about overseas priests and whether guarantees can be given that these priests are appropriately trained and aware of the issues within the Australian church. Dr Ranson, who told

the Commission that 60% of priests currently serving in his Diocese were from overseas, said this aspect was an open question and an 'enormous challenge' to the church.

Bishop Randazzo disputed evidence heard earlier that clericalism was being reintroduced in some parts of priestly formation, telling the Commission that this was not his experience during his time in Brisbane or in Sydney.

While Dr Geraghty urged the Commission to consider Vatican formation documents, which he argued continue to strongly influence the training of seminarians, Bishop Randazzo said the documents provide a 'skeleton' around which local formation programs are devised.

After lunch the Commission called Dr Gerardine Robinson, clinical psychologist and former clinical director of the Encompass program, which was operated by the church in Australia to provide treatment for priests and religious with substance abuse and psychosexual issues during the period 1997 until its closure in 2008. She said the Church's decision to close Encompass was shortsighted.

She told the Commission that out of some 1,100 people to have passed through Encompass, approximately 60 to 70 of them had been child sexual abusers.

She said the Catholic Church attracted people who had three strong features: dependent, compulsive, schizoid. In Australia, this was supplemented by narcissism. She told the Commission that when balanced, these traits generated good priests, who were compliant self starters, interested in people and keen to see things through. Where any of these traits were not in balance, there could be a sense of superiority and entitlement, which was not suitable.

She told the Commission that in her view assessment of a candidate's suitability for the priesthood needed to be multidisciplinary and she was concerned that if completed 'in house' it would not be effective, due to a lack of available expertise, and 'things would be missed'.

She said that she thought that some seminaries were currently reverting back to clericalism practices and that if this continued the Church will need 'ten more Encompasses in the future'.

Dr Robinson discussed issues of suitability of candidates for the priesthood, the 'recycling' of candidates from seminary to seminary, the screening and assessment of candidates, professional supervision of priests, sexual orientation and the need for appropriate education of both formatters and candidates in seminaries.

She told the Commission she did not think celibacy was a causal factor but rather a contributing factor in priests abusing children.

She said she didn't think clergy offenders should be 'thrown out' of their diocese or order. She told the Commission it was important for offenders such as those released from prison to have meaningful work and social supports, to reduce the chance of recidivism. For Church offenders, while accepting that they should never be able to return to ministry, have contact with children, be addressed as a priest or wear clerical dress, she argued that they should remain in a religious community, provided with meaningful work and surrounded by a group of people who would support them in a 'ruthlessly honest' way.

She said expelling them from the church was almost certain to result in them offending again.

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