

**My Appearance before The Royal Commission  
By Fr David Ranson VG, Diocese of Broken Bay**

Having been invited by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to be part of an international academic advisory panel through 2015, I was not surprised to receive the summons to appear for Case Study 50, "Catholic Church Authorities in Australia," in February of this year. The Commissioners asked me to reflect with them on the questions of Governance and Culture (6 February) and Formation of Clergy (13 February).

On the day of my first appearance, when I walked into Macquarie Tower where the Commission is based in Sydney, I found myself behind Anthony and Chrissie Foster. I had never met Anthony and Chrissie, but they were familiar to me through the media. They have become the face of those who had been so hurt by our Church, though, of course, so many of those who have been abused remain without any profile, clothed with anonymity. Anthony and Chrissie's two daughters had been brutally assaulted by a Melbourne priest, and for many years they have fought for justice in the Church. I could not pass them by without introducing myself. When I revealed my identity as a priest to them, their difficulty in receiving me was evident. As we chatted, Anthony's anger was palpable; Chrissie's long suffering was painfully clear. When we brought the conversation to a close upon entering the Hearing Room, Anthony said bluntly to me, "The test of what you say in there will be whether you can look at me in the face afterwards."

I thank God for the gift of my encounter with the Fosters. I was powerless before their anguish; I could offer no word that could come close to touching their anguish and hurt. I could only stand there. When I took the oath later that day, I could think only of them, and all the others who were there that day present with such incalculable pain - some of whom were good friends from Melbourne, and the many others whom I had not met personally. I knew that they were looking to me to say something, anything, that could speak to their pain. I could say nothing. And every word I uttered before the Commission felt entirely feeble before their hurt. And yet, I knew that it was for them and for the countless thousands of others who had been damaged by the institution of which I am an official representative that I was there, struggling to answer the questions of the Commissioners with as much honesty and intelligence as I could.

My encounter with those who had been abused in our Church was the enduring memory I have of my appearance at the Royal Commission. To be honest, I can't remember all I said to the Commissioners themselves, though the transcripts record it. However, sadly there is another image of that day that haunts me. The barristers enjoyed a private room in the complex outside the Hearing Room into which the Church's "witnesses" were invited, too. Here coffee was served them, as was lunch. This, regretfully, gave the impressions that the Church's witnesses were being corralled for support. Nothing, though, was forthcoming from the Church for all the other people present there that day that had suffered horrendously at the hands of our community. They seemed left alone in the foyer, abandoned to fend for themselves, though they were well supported by the Commission itself. Though perhaps unintentional, the consequent impression given was of the "Church" looking after its "own", whilst those so deeply offended against were left out. The gulf for me was dreadfully confronting. But it forcefully illustrates, again, the extraordinary chasm about which most of us are not even aware, let alone prepared to bridge.

We have found ourselves in the shocking situation portrayed by the Commission because we have been seduced as a Church, over many centuries, into a closed social system. Closed systems breed pathology – whether they be political, economic, or religious. We recognize the need for change. Yet, there is every danger that we will go on talking amongst ourselves about the changes required for the situation of abuse "never to occur again" and therefore unwittingly simply perpetuate the closed circle. There can be no future for us in this situation – and no genuine healing and change will occur – until we address the marginalization of those who have been abused, a feature so graphically demonstrated to me on that first day of Case Study 50. Only when we have the courageous humility to put ourselves before those who have been hurt and dare to utter, not only "forgive us" but also, "teach us" will the change that is required truly occur. Then, the system might begin to open before the countenance of pain that must always be the starting point of genuine theology and practice.

Being forced in the public domain to justify our perspectives and our practices as a Church was, I believe, the most important dimension of the entire three weeks before the Commission. For it took us out of the closed

circle of discussion which can all too easily simply re-inforce the very attitudes that, in complex ways, contribute to the occasion of abuse within our community. The Commission has effected for our Church an enormous blessing. Nothing, I believe, has been so significant for Catholic theology and praxis in Australia for the last 150 years. It has demanded that what we hold and practice we do so with rationality and coherence, and it has exposed the fragility of a number of our positions. Sadly, it has forced again the recognition of a variance between rhetoric and practice into which we continue to slide almost despite ourselves.

What change is now possible in our Church? My own expectations are very limited. We are part of a century-long process, maybe even longer, millennial in character. This, however, does not absolve us from the responsibility to make our small contribution upon which successive generations can continue to build in the project of cultural transformation that limits the possibility of such hurt occurring in our Church. I continue to turn to the prophetic prayer of Carlo Carretto, the Little Brother of Jesus writing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century:

How much I must criticise you, my Church and yet how much I love you.

You have made me suffer more than anyone and yet I owe you more than I owe anyone.

I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence.

You have given me much scandal and yet you alone have made me understand holiness.

Never in the world have I seen anything more obscurantist, more compromised, more false, yet never have I touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful.

Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face - and yet, every night I have prayed that I might die in your arms!

No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you.

Then too - where should I go?

To build another Church?

But I cannot build another Church without the same defects, for they are my own defects.

And again, if I were to build another Church, it would be my Church, not Christ's Church.

No, I am old enough. I know better.

Though I had written extensively from the late 1990s about the darkness of sexual abuse within our community, my appearance, nonetheless made me very nervous. The Commission had listed me as their first witness, immediately following the shocking revelation of the extent of abuse within the Church in Australia. I had met with Senior Counsel and the barristers of the Church's Truth, Justice and Healing Council the week before, and been briefed by them. Nonetheless, it was daunting to appear before the nation, as it were, and be the first to explain the presence of such criminality in our community which professes the care of the vulnerable to be primary to its mission. Now having read each day's transcripts that followed my initial appearance, the discussions of Case Study 50 have been, I believe, both engaging and constructive. Notwithstanding, the exposure at times through the discussions of our failure to appreciate both the extent and the depth of what we are dealing with, we have been forced to acknowledge the enormous challenge of bringing consistency in professional practice over the 75 autonomous entities in Australian that constitute the "Catholic Church." The hearings have identified the need for a stronger national Professional Standards body than is currently envisaged. The Commission has identified the need for transparent and accountable annual reporting of statistics related to claims of both abuse and sexual misconduct. And most importantly the Commission has wrestled with what kind of civil structures might ensue for greater professional accreditation, accountability, and supervision of clergy and Religious. It has laid bare the psychological profile of clergy, and put before us challenges to both their initial and ongoing formation. It has demanded Magisterial and pastoral clarity on the nature of the confessional seal and Absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The test now will be found in the discussions that ensue at the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in May of this year, and the way in which our journey to the Australian Plenary Council in 2020 is shaped.

I did not see Anthony Foster at the end of my first appearance. He and Chrissie had left the building by the time I came off the stand. However, after my second appearance a week later I saw them in a café on the ground floor of Macquarie Tower. Anthony was wearing a T-Shirt, declaring "I am ontologically challenged" – a play on one of the points of discussion at the Commission about the nature of priestly Ordination. I will never be able to say a word that can touch the pain that he and Chrissie carry. How could I ever come close to understanding the loss they have experienced because of the perpetration of such evil? But, thanks be to God alone, on that day, at least, I could extend my hand in greeting, enjoy a moment with them, and look them in the face. And for me, nothing else was more important.