



Headmaster's reflection at EREA apology

John Crowley, Headmaster St Patrick's College, Ballarat

St Patrick's College headmaster John Crowley delivered the following speech in Canberra on Thursday, June 1, 2017 as the College's governing body, Edmund Rice Education Australia, delivered a formal apology to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

This reflection represents another significant step in the College's journey towards reconciliation with victims and survivors. It follows more than five years of commitment to building strong relationships for the future.

"It has now been two years since the first sitting of Case 28 into Institutional Responses of Catholic Church Authorities in the Diocese of Ballarat. There was a palpable mixture of anger and anxiety that day - scores of people crammed into a tiny room at the Ballarat Magistrates' Court. Victims and survivors, together with their support people, gathered on one side of the room. Church authorities gathered on the other. I recall thinking how this separation perfectly symbolised the tenuous and strained relationship which existed between the groups, a direct product of the response of the Church over many decades leading up to that moment. It felt as far away from the call of the Gospel as one could imagine.

It was my great hope at the time that the Royal Commission's efforts would lay bare the extent of the sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and that from there a glimmer of hope for healing, no matter how faint, could be discovered. It was incredibly confronting to listen to gruelling accounts of abuse from victims and survivors but, throughout those days, I held onto the belief that things could be different for the Church in the future. As two survivors from St Patrick's College, Ballarat, constantly say to me, "something good must come of all of this". Both of these inspirational men are here with us today.

I have, however, on many occasions over the past two years, wondered whether this glimmer of hope will appear. Reading a recent transcript of a speech delivered by Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Commission, where he addressed a gathering at Villa Maria Parish, Hunter's Hill in Sydney, one could be forgiven for thinking it may very well have been extinguished:

".....If the Church in Australia doesn't see continuous, concerted change from our leaders driven and backed by an active and demanding Catholic Community, then our Church as a religion will become a marginalized rump, stripped of credibility and relevance, left to preach to an ever aging congregation with eyes on an ever dimming here after."

Initially I struggled with the bleakness of this assessment. Over time, however, and through honest and deep reflection on my own experiences as the leader of St Patrick's College, I have come to recognise both the truth in what he says and the hope that still exists for the Church. Like the tongues of flames that rested on each of those present in the room at Pentecost, this hope exists through each of us here today, all in one place, together.

Just like those who gathered in that room, there exists a journey which requires enormous courage. And the very first step we must take on this journey of renewal for our Church is to stand in solidarity with victims and survivors and proclaim without hesitation or doubt: "we are with you". We must have the mettle to use our voice and insist that all Church leaders, ourselves included, seek to strengthen this relationship into one of trust at every possible opportunity. No longer can we respond with carefully selected yet hollow words, broken promises or empty sentiments. The test of our authenticity will be measured through action. There must be no exceptions and no excuses.

Over the past two years there have been times of silence from senior leaders in Catholic education in response to the work of the Royal Commission. Today, in this space, a new chapter opens for us. In the words of Jesus, to "receive the Holy Spirit" we must go into our own school communities with a renewed commitment to this journey towards the hope of healing. It will begin when we have the humility to recognise that we must seek out the anguish we have caused rather than wait for the anguished to come to us. To acknowledge openly and honestly the full extent of what has happened. To sit with victims and survivors often and truly listen. Gently. To say sorry. To talk about the future, together.

Having spent hundreds of hours in conversation with victims and survivors over the past two years, I know we are at a crossroads and the credibility of our mission as a Church is in question. Whether the flicker of hope rekindles and remains alight is up to us.

There is no formula which will yield a precise set of actions required from each of us here today. Instead, we can only listen to our hearts and put our trust in the call of our Charter as a source of inspiration. Every action past, present and future which comes from this place will be an action grounded in the Gospel and will be the right one.

It seems to me that, as a Church, we have often lived in fear of what victims and survivors might ask of us. In my experience they are wanting us to walk with them. I wonder the impact we would have if we accompanied survivors to meetings with lawyers, if we galvanized our school community to provide practical support and assistance to those wounded by the Church and for whom everyday life is a constant struggle, if we lobbied our politicians and media to ensure an appropriate redress scheme is established. If we picked up the phone and called. Actions like these require radical courage to chart a course of action where trust replaces suspicion. Where healing is even a possibility.

The most hope-filled people I have encountered over the past two years have been the victims and survivors themselves. The very same people who were abused in our schools are the very same people who have been the most life-giving, open, encouraging and supportive throughout our journey together. It is these people who are burning bright with the flame of Pentecost, the flame of hope, a hope that things can be different.

This says much about the urgency of finding our own voice."

John Crowley,
Headmaster
St Patrick's College, Ballarat
Thursday, June 1, 2017