

SPEECH

Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn

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Thursday 22 March 2018



**Check against delivery

Good evening

After five years, 57 case studies, 8,000 private sessions and over 1,300 witnesses the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has delivered a comprehensive and confronting report.

It comprises 17 volumes, contains 189 recommendations – many of which relate to the Catholic Church – with 20 specifically dealing with the Catholic Church.

Volume 16, entitled Religious Institutions, is made up of three books, close to 800 pages each – one of these books is entirely focused on the Catholic Church.

As it happens, the Commission has revealed that more than 36 percent of all abuse victims involved with the Commission were abused in the Catholic Church.

The Commission's data survey reveals that 4,445 individuals alleged abuse within the Church in the period 1950 to 2010.

One thousand eight hundred and eighty priests and religious were accused of abuse over that time.

No wonder the Commission paid so much attention to the Church.

What did the Commission find about the incidence and the response of the Church to child sexual abuse?

In short – children were abused because they could be abused.

These were crimes, not just failures of character, or sinful behaviour as some have suggested.

Perpetrating priests and religious brothers targeted, groomed and exploited vulnerable children wherever and whenever it was possible.

Let's make no mistake... they were criminals.

Church leaders and their officials gravely mismanaged cases of abuse.

At times they did not believe the victims or even their families. Often, they didn't inform the police. They concealed information and protected perpetrators.

The Church as an institution acted just like any other institution.

It risk-managed and protected itself, including its assets.

It deployed rigorous, legal defences and hard ball negotiations.

It used its might to prevail over victims, even when they knew that the abuse had occurred.

This has become a familiar, and tragic refrain.

The Commission's findings come as no surprise, even though they are shocking and a terrible indictment on our religious organisation.

Throughout the course of the five years we learnt much, but unfortunately are still left with many questions.

This is because most of the case studies involving the Church were about abuse which happened from the 1970s and 1980s.

A time when clericalism and the dysfunction of the clericalist culture was stronger than it is today.

A time when the power imbalance between clerics and the lay community was still played out in unquestioning compliance because 'father knows best'.

A time when the authority of bishops and religious leaders was more strident.

A time when secrecy, tribalism and the bulwark mentality of the Church warded off critics and threats alike in a self-serving belief that the Church's future demanded it.

Many of the key players of those times were not able to give evidence to the Commission. They had died or were too incapacitated. So we were left to surmise, and in the end wonder, why leaders and others acted the way they did.

That said, we do have a pretty good handle on the culture in which these administrators operated.

Our Council laid out a comprehensive submission to the Commission along these lines.

Much of what we outlined was taken up by the Commission in its description of the factors that led to the abysmal institutional response by the Church to incidents of abuse including:

...clericalism,

...structure and governance issues,

...leadership failures,

...Canon law, and

...celibacy, to name just a few

And let's remember, all sexual abuse is an abuse of power. So too is its cover up.

The leadership of an organisation, including our own, shapes the assumptions, values, beliefs and norms of its culture. This in turn influences how individuals behave, particularly with vulnerable people, and it sets a standard of what is, or isn't, acceptable.

The stark findings of the Commission paint the picture of an arrogant and hypocritical Church.

Too often the safety and welfare of children were not the number one priority.

It is hard not to conclude that the dignity and worth of an abused child or even that of children at risk was far less important than the reputation of a priest or brother.

The Commission made many recommendations that relate to the future administration and child protection policies of all institutions.

Interestingly, they did not find any significant problems with how Catholic Church schools, welfare or other social services operate today.

There were no adverse findings against how these organisations deal with abuse allegations, complaints or how they educate staff in prevention and protection measures.

In fact, the Commission made the point that the Church leadership could learn from the way these services are run.

This is a direct result of the effort that the Church has gone to over the past 20 years to get its act together on the welfare and protection of children.

The Commission made much of the decision-making and accountabilities that functioned in the Church throughout the period it examined. It maintains that a lot of that dysfunction still exists today in the Church.

As a consequence, the Commission has called on Church leaders to instigate a major review of diocesan structures and governance.

This is important.

As a Church we need governance that best reflects the pastoral needs of our community.

The track record of leaders throughout the abuse scandal fell well short of best practice governance.

In so many ways leaders failed to respond as pastors to those who were abused.

Whether the culture of the church prohibited bishops and leaders is one thing but more importantly it shows that unless the church is clear about what is important and essential, things can go very badly wrong.

This means governance must reflect the identity, ethos and purpose of what a Church is about.

It must not fall into the trap of maintaining a rigid and defensive organisational focus where its mission, as articulated by the Gospel, is undermined by expediency and self-preservation.

So, in short, we need governance and decision-making processes that reflect the lived experience of those being governed.

Whether it is more women in governance roles, or others who for too long have been isolated from participation, the continuity between how decisions are made and the needs of those being governed needs to be seamless and strong.

As I said before, the Commission went out of its way to affirm the more recent Church structures that have deployed the best practices of corporate governance in the arrangements for ministries across education, health and welfare services.

One glaring feature of these structures is their lay leadership.

Even more notable is that these structures are legitimate Church companies that have the same status in the Church as any diocese or religious order.

Clearly there is much the rest of the institution can learn from how lay-led canonical structures are responding to the pastoral and ministerial needs of local communities.

In essence, we are talking about lay participation in the decisions made about the way the church operates, how dioceses and parishes operate, how priests and religious engage with the rest of us. And in turn how lay involvement can shape our doctrine.

These are all decisions that for 2,000 years have been made by a handful of men, relatively speaking, on behalf of the entire Church.

Maybe at this time, there should at least be some consideration given to a different approach.

The majority of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission called on the Australian bishops to address universal Church issues with the Vatican.

Interestingly, the Royal Commission pulled back from making any definitive policy recommendations around issues like celibacy but certainly made it clear that the Church needs to carefully examine the role of celibacy in the unfolding sex abuse scandal.

The Royal Commission's recommendations on the seal of confession are far more problematic.

Some have wondered whether this recommendation was included to test the Church's capacity to examine some of the issues at the very core of its teachings.

At best the evidence before the Royal Commission about abuse of the seal was selective and patchy.

It was hard to see any systemic abuse of the sacrament but it does beg the question, how are priests instructed to administer the seal where abuse is disclosed?

A litmus test for the Church leadership will be the degree to which they act on the recommendations of the Commission.

For the past 18 months our Council has called for a substantial implementation strategy to be established, resourced and charged with an independent brief to get things going.

As they say, watch this space!

In that context I was heartened by our own Archbishop, Christopher Prowse's statement recognising that the Church needs to respond to the scandal with even better protection and prevention measures, and a review of its governance. He's already instigated his own practical measures.

Apart from the devastation the abuse has had, and in many cases, continues to have on survivors, the scandal has left ordinary Catholics appalled.

Across the last five years I have heard their despair, disenchantment and for too many others, their decision to disengage.

A quick analysis of the 2016 National Church Life Survey which was released in part earlier this year, makes the situation very plain.

Nearly three out of five Church goers (57 percent) agree that their confidence in Church authorities has been damaged by the cases of sex abuse by priests and religious.

More than one-third of church goers (35 percent) agree that their respect for priests and religious has declined as a result of these offences.

Nearly two thirds of Church goers (64 percent) agreed that the response of Church authorities to incidents of child sexual abuse had been inadequate and showed a complete failure of responsibility.

This visceral reaction within the Catholic community is succinctly reflected in one of the Commission's overarching findings on the Catholic Church, and I quote from the report:

We have concluded that there were catastrophic failures of leadership of Catholic Church authorities over many decades, particularly before the 1990s. Those failures led to the suffering of a great number of children, their families and wider communities.

For many, the harm was irreparable. In numerous cases, that harm could have been avoided had Catholic Church authorities acted in the interests of children rather than in their own interests.

This division, born of mistrust in our leadership needs healing.

I think that can only occur if we are moving as a faith community along an agreed pathway. The alternative is too divisive, even schismatic.

Already too many have left and far too many others are wavering.

In our contemporary context that agreed path requires us all to 'get with the program'.

In my mind that could start with listening to Pope Francis.

He famously has said that we are not living in an era of change. Rather we are living in a change of era.

He means that we must wake up to the paradigm shift.

The days of Christendom are over.

So too are the days where young people are socialised into their religion in a society that prizes religious belief and practice.

On the contrary religious affiliation is on the decline in Australia and in some quarters actively disparaged.

Now everything is contestable and even disposable.

So, faith needs to be understood more as a personal journey of self-discovery and divine revelation with other like-minded folk – let's call it a movement – than primarily a tribal allegiance held together by rules and group identification.

The attitude of the Church in today's world is far removed from the triumphant and doctrinaire approach of times past.

The engagement of the Church in the modern world cannot be about imposing a blueprint on how life should be lived.

Rather, Pope Francis calls us to be a missionary Church, walking alongside our fellow citizens, being far less dogmatic and rule-focused.

A Church that risks involvement and even compromise as it seeks to be pastoral, responsive, inclusive and merciful.

And let me emphasise, here that means walking alone-side our leaders, not undermining their capacity to make changes by so marginalising them that the 'us and them' divide becomes unbridgeable.

In a recent speech Chicago's Cardinal Cupich, reflecting on the Pope's exhortation on the family, said

...that there must be an interplay between the Church's teaching and the reality of the family: a balance between teaching and listening.... a reciprocity.

That's why families are not problems that we have to bring solutions to, but rather opportunities for us to see what God is doing.

Cupich went to say that

...the new model of ministry to families is one of accompaniment and is marked by a deep respect for the conscience of the faithful.

Now of course you can replace the attention on families with the pastoral response to women, or to same sex attracted people, or to millennials or to divorced Catholics.

This calls all of us to jointly discern what is good and true.

It means recognising that as adults we have an autonomy, based on a fully formed conscience and a right to exercise it in all forms be they civil, or Church.

And as a Church we need to rediscover and resource adult education and formation, so that we may truly be a mature church, articulate, authentic and actualised.

It asks us to be attentive to the new ways the Spirit is moving.

It requires of us a governance and teaching capacity that reflects the interests and needs of those it serves.

It challenges us to move from our conservatism.

Fortunately, the scriptures give us the insight.

The parable of the talents has something important to tell us.

We know the story well enough. Three slaves are given money by their master according to their abilities. One receives five talents, another two talents and the last, one talent.

The first two slaves invest and grow their money. The third slave hides his talent out of fear.

As you know it is not a happy ending for the third slave. He is criticised and banished.

Why? Scripture scholar Jose Pagola, who I like reading, says that

...the greatest mistake of the third slave is not that he buried his talent without making it produce anything, but that he thought he was responding faithfully to God by keeping it safe from risks.

Pagola goes on to say

...we are not being faithful to God by leaving everything unchanged.

That kind of faithfulness masks things like rigidity, cowardice, paralysis, comfort and a lack of faith in the creativity of the Spirit.

But true faithfulness is not lived in passivity and inertia, but in the vitality and courage of those who try to hear God's call in our own time.

The implications for us today as a faith community, as a group of seekers being Church, is not to keep the past safe.

There is no point being faithful to the past when the past has very little relationship to the questions and challenges of today.

It's not the Church's job merely to survive.

It does no good to restore the past if we are unable to pass on something meaningful to men and women, of all ages, today.

Pagola says, that for this reason

...the virtues we need to develop in today's Church are not 'prudence', 'conformity', 'resignation', 'faithfulness to the past'.

Rather, they are 'courage', 'the ability to risk', 'creative searching', 'listening to the Spirit', who always makes things new.

So, in that spirit, what have we learnt and where do we go?

This is a big question and the answer varies wildly depending on who you talk to, how closely they have been involved in the process and what their starting position was.

If you were to speak to someone who was abused by a priest or a religious you might hear that the Church has learnt nothing.

Just this week we received an email from an abuse survivor accusing the Church of disgracefully under paying him and point-blank refusing to do what is right.

He accused us – the Church – of being 'sick paedophile sympathisers', that he is 'sick to the bone' and that we 'should be ashamed' of ourselves.

And, I for one, believe that he honestly and sincerely believes what he says and that his rage, for many different and unknown and perhaps unknowable reasons, is well justified.

We spent years trying to disprove the truth of abuse victims.

And a couple of weeks ago I was in Melbourne at a Senate redress hearing.

The animosity and hostility I felt from some of the people in the room was not much different to the reception we received the first time we appeared before the Royal Commission on 9 December 2013.

That was the day when a dozen survivors walked out in disgust at how we presented the Church's position before the Royal Commission.

It doesn't really matter, regardless of what was said, whether they were going to walk out or not. What was clear was the level of disgust and mistrust they held for the Church.

So, for many people – nothing has changed.

For many survivors the Church is still hard.

Many feel they still face lawyers rather than pastors.

They face accountants rather than companions.

They face bureaucrats rather than a loving and caring Church ready to do whatever is needed to right the wrongs and hack some sort of path out of darkness.

If you were to talk to people within the Church, particularly some leaders, they will say we have learnt much.

They say there is now a much greater understanding of the true impact of child sexual abuse.

They say that while the Church has led the way in putting in place survivor focus support services, like *Towards Healing* and *The Melbourne Response*, more needs to be done.

Many Church leaders now recognise that the culture of clericalism within the Church, on balance, is a bad thing rather than something to be supported.

Most leaders are now prepared to accept, as indicated by their support for a national redress scheme, the Church's new standards setting and auditing body, and other reforms, that things had to change.

Importantly, they now accept that Church leaders in the past got it wrong.

Most, if not all, are now prepared to call the abuse crisis for what it is.

They accept that crimes were committed, that reputation was put ahead of thousands of children who were in real and present danger, and that the Church used its might and power to silence and crush survivors.

It now seems unbelievable that some Church leaders have only come to these positions over the past five years, but the facts are that at the start of the Commission many could not accept this as the way it was.

For many leaders there has been an awakening.

For the people in the pews, for people like you, it is relatively easy to see what has been learnt.

We all now have a much clearer understanding of the shocking and pervasive extent of the abuse crisis.

We have learnt, with disgust and disgrace, the appalling way in which it was handled by past leaders.

We have learnt the true extent of the way in which the crisis has corroded the trust in our leaders and eaten away at our faith.

The people in the pews know that the worst is not over, that there is no climbing out of the very dark hole we find ourselves in any time soon.

The answers to 'what have we learnt?' as I said, are complicated.

And I think we will only know some time in the next few years, when we see how the Church leadership responds to the Royal Commission's recommendations....

...when we see if there are any real and sustained changes, particularly within the Church's culture...

...if the upper reaches of the Church become more accountable and transparent...

...if the leadership becomes more open, more accepting of alternative views – and prepared to listen, not just pay lip service.

And while I'm not yet prepared to call this, I think there is hope.

Commission Fatigue

I have often said the Royal Commission was 20 years too late and two years too long.

If it had been held in the 1990s or even 2000s then many of the Church leaders who were involved in the direct management of the abuse crisis would be alive to explain, as best they could, their decisions and behaviour.

And many more of the survivors would also be alive to tell their stories.

But significantly the Commission, which was originally set down to run for three years was extended to five.

This might have given many more survivors the opportunity to meet with Commissioners in private sessions – which was a good thing – but it did little to advance the knowledge and understanding of the way in which institutions responded to child sexual abuse.

What we saw over the last two years, from around the start of 2016, was a slow fall away in the media interest in the Commission's hearings and as a result, in community interest.

In late 2015 I wrote a blog in which I said that two weeks into the hearing into the Melbourne Archdiocese there was a strange sense that the constant stream of abuse stories and maladministration by Church officials was becoming "old news"!

I wrote that even seasoned journalists were recognising the sense of public fatigue that was surrounding the hearings.

Some say that the community has 'turned off' its attention to the work of the Royal Commission.

As a result, the pressure on everyone involved – institutional leaders, governments, community and other groups – dialled down.

As we have seen over the past couple of years, governments around the country have sat on their hands as survivors and survivor groups have called out for the redress scheme recommended by the Commission.

I suspect that if the Commission had finished around this time the momentum for reform would have moved governments to getting a redress scheme up and running a lot faster than they have.

The loss of Outrage

Alongside this idea of Commission fatigue sits a broader concern we all face, the idea that we can no longer be outraged, particularly at a societal level.

While most of us may still have the capacity for empathy and to boil inside with rage, rarely does this coalesce into a movement or an uprising, at least an uprising most of us are prepared to join.

And while I understand and appreciate you have come here this evening to show solidarity for abuse survivors and to demand more from our Church leaders, where do you go from here?

The reality is that for most of us, every day we click on a news story or switch on the TV to see extraordinary things.

...the lifeless body of a small boy in a red tee shirt washed up on a beach near a Turkish resort,

...students massacred in their high schools,

...homes destroyed by floods and fires as the climate becomes ever more unpredictable.

We see events unfold almost in real time – terrorist attacks, devastating hunger and famine, unbridled greed and corruption – but what do we do? What do we feel we can do?

And while much of this leaves a shadow, a bad taste in our mouth, it seems catastrophe and crisis have become common place.

As we flick from site to site, from station to station, the horror has almost become entertainment.

We are interested but we do little – like going to the movies the only expectation on us is to be passive, to sit and watch.

It's like we have reached outrage overload.

And the outrage that many Catholics and the broader community displayed over the course of the Royal Commission was very real.

The concern here tonight does have a life of its own.

But it remains a fact that unless we all do more than attend a meeting or sign a petition not a lot will change.

Thank you.

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