

MEDIA RELEASE

Catholic Church must look at its culture: Truth Justice and Healing Council CEO says

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Mr Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council, has delivered his first wide ranging public speech on the issues and approach the Catholic Church's independent advisory group will take in the lead up to and throughout the Royal Commission into child abuse.

Mr Sullivan said the 13-member Council, made up of 10 lay people including four who have been victims of clerical sexual abuse or have family members who have been abused, would provide independent advice on reforms to the Church across a range of issues.

Mr Sullivan, speaking to the St Thomas More Forum in Canberra last night, spoke extensively about how the victims of clerical abuse had been treated by the Church in the past and currently.

"We need to put in place better systems, processes, redress and contrition that says, in one way or another – you are damaged, we believe you, we are sorry, we want to help you heal and we are working to try to make sure that what you went through never happens again.

"We have to examine a culture which has allowed secrecy and silence, intimidation, legalism and obfuscation to let sexual abuse happen."

Mr Sullivan said the Council, which has the full support of Catholic Bishops and religious congregational leaders from across Australia, is presently developing the shape of submissions and reviews of the Church's two victims' redress systems, Towards Healing and the Melbourne Response, in light of best practice.

"Both these approaches were ground breaking and well ahead of their time but now need to be reviewed.

"We are also looking at a range of other issues: working with children checks; reporting abuse to police, the possible liability of Bishops and other Church leaders and questions as to limitations on compensation."

He said the Council, on instruction from the Royal Commission, has already collected some 150,000 documents from Dioceses, religious congregations, catholic education offices and other church entities – 24,000 of these have already been provided to the Commission.

"This is time consuming, intense work. It brings together everything the Commission is after: every file, every policy, every incident report that touches on child sexual abuse.

"When complete, the documentation will provide a comprehensive picture of the Catholic Church's response to incidents of child sexual abuse within its institutions over time - from about 1960 to date.

The Council is also independently collecting information on the extent and handling of child sexual abuse in the Church including how many people have come to the church with allegations, how many priests, brothers, nuns and lay workers were involved, how many were reported to police, how many charges were laid and how many people were jailed.

Mr Sullivan said he believes the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is a crucial exercise for the future of the Church in Australia.

“People who have fallen prey to offenders have the right to tell their stories and to expect justice.

“This is a dark period in our Church's history and only when the truth comes out can sustainable healing begin,” Mr Sullivan said.

Mr Sullivan said many well-intentioned people have grappled with doing the right thing and being there for victims, often to fall short in the eyes of those who have been damaged.

“Maybe in the commercial world some will shrug their shoulders and say, ‘sorry, this is as good as it gets’.

“But for the Church we have to go the extra mile, ours must be ‘how good can it get’,” he said.

The Truth Justice and Healing Council has been established by the Catholic Church to coordinate the Catholic Church response to the Royal Commission into the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Its role is to oversee the Church's engagement with the Commission, to develop new policies to protect young people and to ensure the Church responds to any future complaints appropriately with justice, putting the needs of victims first.

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