



AQUINAS ACADEMY

Freedom of the spirit in the Spirit

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Francis Sullivan speaks at the Aquinas Academy

The opportunity to hear the CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, Francis Sullivan, talk about the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse, drew more than one hundred people to the Aquinas Academy in Sydney.

Francis gave the second presentation in what will be a series of four public conversations sponsored by Academy and Catalyst for Renewal. ABC broadcaster Geraldine Doogue presented the first address. Following Francis, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson will speak and finally the forensic psychologist, Francis Webster.

The overall aim of the series is to increase understanding not only of the significance of the Royal Commission, its scope and its operation but also its implications for the Catholic Church.

For many Catholics the task of learning about the Royal Commission is not something they're prepared to leave to the media. The media's important work of revelation and inquiry needs to be augmented by a wider understanding of the Commission and what it means for the Church.

It would be a worry if the wide community of Catholics decided to settle for being mere passive observers of a process where we need knowledgeable participants.

People need to become better informed, to help lift a state of "unawareness" that makes people vulnerable to narrow thinking. What these conversations at the Aquinas Academy provide is the data, the hard facts and a clear-eyed perspective of the reality of sexual abuse and its implications for many institutions, including the Catholic Church.

For the audience at the Academy it was crucial to see a senior Catholic figure, such as Francis Sullivan, be so bluntly honest in acknowledging the failures of the Church – not only the perpetrators of sexual abuse but other agents of the Church who did not handle the crimes at all well. Francis acknowledged that the actions of the Catholic Church ranged from 'the criminal through the ignorant to the naïve and the confused'.

Seeing that Francis wasn't prepared to pull his punches gave the event a hopeful atmosphere. One prominent Catholic lay person described it as 'hope-filled'. Those present got a glimpse of what might be possible if we face this terrible crisis honestly.

The conversation at Aquinas Academy allowed a number of individuals to speak of their own experiences. Some were angry, others expressed deep sadness. Once again the raw honesty of personal accounts underlined what Francis Sullivan had said.

By its conclusion the event itself had emphasized the importance of leading Church figures asking the hard questions about the culture of the Church and the institutional reality that has allowed such problems to arise.

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