

## **Better safety and protection for our children**

I am writing this from Brisbane where the Royal Commission is investigating a Catholic primary school in Toowoomba in Queensland. It is the sixth public hearing and the second directly involving the Catholic Church.

Many of you will have read or heard about this particularly sad and horrifying case. In 2010 Gerard Byrnes, a teacher at the school, was convicted of rape and indecent dealing involving 13 female pupils in his year 4 class. The tragedy of this case is that parents made complaints against the teacher, but for reasons the Royal Commission is trying to understand, the abuse continued for 12 months.

It is gut wrenching sitting in the hearing rooms and listening to the parents of the girls detailing the crimes and the impact this has had on their daughters. As a parent, I empathize, and can only imagine their hurt, anger and shear frustration.

Unlike previous cases examined by the Royal Commission, this is a recent case and the survivors are still school children. It is hard to understand how this situation occurred. How with everything we know about child sexual abuse, could this have happened, and how could these children and their families have been so let down?

What is shocking about this Toowoomba case is that strict policies and procedures relating to how abuse cases were to be handled *were* in place. Since 1996 the Catholic Church has acknowledged its dismal handling of child sex abuse cases in the past and put in place clear procedures for managing and reporting allegations of sex abuse cases.

Yet, despite our best knowledge, training, policies and procedures, 13 little girls continued to be abused at a Catholic school in Toowoomba. It is abhorrent and undermines our confidence in the value of policies and procedures.

Clearly, procedures are only as good as the compliance that staff and personnel bring to the situation. Compliance is only as good as the governance risk management process that compels it.

The Council has recognized that the only way to solve this obvious gap in policy development is for the Catholic Church to establish an independent body of oversight. In a recent submission to the Royal Commission, the Council suggested this body would ensure standards of child protection and professional compliance to protocols are imposed, checked and reported on for every Church authority on a regular basis.

# Blog

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Some may say, the horse has bolted and this is too little too late, but it is never too late. We must get this right; we must make changes because, as the Toowoomba case study has shown us, protocols and procedures are not enough. We need authority, compliance, accountability and auditing. We need Church authorities held accountable to other authorities. It is only then that we can have the confidence that our procedures are watertight.

When I visited Toowoomba recently, and spoke with the teachers and community members in the school staffroom, it was clear the experiences of 2007 and 2008 are still fresh. This was such a travesty, and such a tragedy, and the trust that a community should put in a Catholic school, and certainly in the Catholic Church, was eroded.

Establishing appropriate policies and procedures is the first step to handling the reporting and management of child sex abuse cases; the second step is establishing an independent body of oversight. It is only when these two processes are working in conjunction that we will see greater protection and safety for our children.

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