Blog

TRUTH JUSTICE HEALING COUNCIL

Universally protecting children

The Catholic Church is now between hearings at the Royal Commission. During this time we will consolidate on what we have learnt, continue work on our reform documents and prepare for the next hearings.

It has been a busy and confronting time with the Catholic Church involved in five of the 12 public hearings since December last year. We have also developed and written five submissions to Royal Commission issues papers and we are finalizing our submission to the sixth issues paper *Redress Schemes* due next month. We have participated in the first round table discussion and we are working with the Royal Commission on their research project on child protection programs in schools.

The Catholic Church has been involved in more hearings than any other institution. This is what we expected and have prepared for. It is important to understand that for each hearing, not only is it traumatic for survivors to come forward and relive the horrors from their childhood and tell their story, but the hearings are also a shocking reminder for local Catholic communities about what has occurred.

In the lead up to every hearing, dioceses and religious orders involved communicate with their local Catholic communities.

In letters sent from bishops and congregation leaders the communities are prepared and reminded that the Catholic Church's approach to the Royal Commission is one of openness, transparency, fessing up to the past and explaining ourselves. Our resolve is to present a full explanation at every hearing and provide the Royal Commission with everything that is required to get the job done.

This approach enables us to contribute to society's broader commitment to purge child sex abuse in our institutions forever.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse is one of three Royal Commissions running concurrently in Australia. Despite this, and the fact the media may at times be captured by the other Royal Commissions, the excellent work unraveling the events and causes of institutional sex abuse continues.

The Pope's Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors held their inaugural meeting in the Vatican City earlier this month. At the press conference following the meeting, Chair of the Commission, Boston Cardinal, Sean O'Malley said the Roman Catholic Church failed to recognize the worldwide reach of clerical sexual abuse.

"Many don't see it as a problem of the universal Church. In many people's minds it is an American problem, an Irish problem or a German problem. The Church has to face it is everywhere in the world. There is so much denial. The Church has to respond to make the Church safe for children," Cardinal Sean O'Malley said.

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In Australia, our Church leadership is acutely aware of the problem. The Church supported the call for a Royal Commission and promised a truly honest, open and transparent approach by every parish, dioceses, religious order and religious leader throughout Australia.

I was again reminded of this support when I addressed the Plenary meeting of the Australian Catholic bishops and over 20 of the religious leaders recently. The bishops know this is our time to admit our failings, care for survivors and ensure child sex abuse is not part of the future Church.

Last week I travelled to Brisbane and had a very positive and productive meeting with the Queensland Catholic Education Commission. We discussed the Royal Commission, particularly our reform agenda. I was impressed with the detailed work and dedicated programs the team has developed surrounding child protection policies and education.

While in Brisbane I also met with Bravehearts CEO and founder, Hetty Johnston. Bravehearts, through many programs and events, are doing an excellent job in raising the awareness of child protection throughout Australia. It is pleasing to see Bravehearts and the Catholic Church working together on a number of educational programs that will strengthen our knowledge and skill in best practice child protection.

As we spend the next few weeks strengthening our reform documents and issues papers and preparing for the next round of hearings, our thoughts are always with survivors. Their battle is daily and their journey continues. Our hope is that the work we do will make their journey a little less painful and they can see a way to a better future.

Francis Sullivan

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au