Blog

TRUTH JUSTICE HEALING COUNCIL

Marist Brothers at the Royal Commission

The Marist Brothers will be the focus of the next public hearing at the Royal Commission from 10-20 June. The Commission will analyze the allegations of child sex abuse by Brother John Chute (also known as Brother Kostka) and another former brother from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Our thoughts are with the survivors and their families as they are asked to retell their stories and relive the horror that has plagued their lives. I hope they find strength and courage in knowing they are believed and supported.

This public hearing will also have a large impact on the Canberra community. Marist College Canberra is a high profile and popular school, many people are connected with the College, indeed my own son was the College Captain a number of years ago, and many colleagues and friends are part of the extended Marist family.

The scandal of child sex abuse has dogged the College for many years and undermined many Catholics' confidence in the Church leadership. This public hearing is a chance for the Marist leadership to step up, and to be fully transparent about what happened.

It is terribly important for families and parents, who have children at Marist schools, to understand what happened in the past and to be assured that policies and procedures are now in place to ensure the safety of their children.

With Canberra the focus of the next public hearing, there is also plenty of work going on around the country to ensure the Church is transparent and is addressing the issue of clerical sex abuse.

Last week I travelled to both Wollongong and Shepparaton to meet with the diocesan leaders. Wollongong was formally asked by the Royal Commission last year to provide documents and they have systemically and professionally gathered all the relevant information.

Under the leadership of the Bishop of Wollongong, Peter Ingham, the diocese is absolutely committed to providing the Royal Commission with every detail that may assist in their investigation. It has been time consuming and resource intensive, but the team is driven by a determined directive to be open, transparent and up front.

In the words of Bishop Ingham, *"I renew my heartfelt apology to survivors of sexual abuse by Catholic Church personnel. I wish to assure you and the wider community that the Diocese of Wollongong is committed to the protection of children and young people and to addressing with sensitivity and determination any concern or allegation brought forward. In fact, my words of apology and sorrow would be hollow without decisive action."*

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Later in the week I travelled to Shepparton on the floodplain of the Goulburn River in central Victoria and met with 50 principals, administrators and priests from the Catholic Education Office in the Diocese of Sandhurst.

With a community made up of 40 primary schools, secondary colleges and flexible learning settings the group is committed to providing top quality education within a Catholic philosophy.

Although not the focus of an inquiry the group is acutely aware of the impact clerical sex abuse has on Catholic education. They are working overtime to ensure policies and procedures are in place and that they are appropriately audited to ensure the utmost safety and care for their students. They were keen to hear about the work the Council is doing and it was pleasing to get their strong endorsement on the open approach we are taking.

Speaking with many groups throughout Australia I am aware of the significant interest in the Church's history of child sexual abuse. There is a real desire and commitment to listen and care for survivors and support reforms to make all Catholic Institutions as safe as possible for children.

I was equally pleased to read reports this week that Pope Francis plans to meet in the Vatican next month with survivors of clerical sexual abuse.

This is a great initiative and sends a clear message to the world that the child sexual abuse within the Church is at the very centre of the Pope's thinking.

Francis Sullivan

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au