

Marist Brothers explain the past

I have just walked out of the ACT Magistrates Court on day one of the Royal Commission hearing into the response of the Marist Brothers to allegations of child sexual abuse. The abuse occurred in schools during the 70s, 80s and 90s in the ACT, NSW and QLD. The brisk Canberra winter air is a sharp contrast to the emotion, the anger, the sadness and sheer despair overflowing from the tiny hearing room.

This 13th public hearing, and the sixth involving the Catholic Church, will investigate who knew what, when they knew it, and what, if anything, they did about it.

Throughout the day survivors painted a picture of childhoods stripped of innocence. These are very confronting stories.

In a letter to parishioners, the Catholic Archbishop of Goulburn and Canberra, Christopher Prowse, warned of the terrible stories that would unfold during these hearings. He said:

“Many of you will be shaken by these horrendous stories. Survivors deserve our prayers and support. They have been courageous in coming forward...these criminal acts are a cause of deep shame and humiliation for the Catholic Church. I offer my sincere apologies to any survivor. I commit the Archdiocese to co-operate fully with this Royal Commission in every way possible.”

This is a very confronting, but necessary hearing. For the Church to claim that it is, amongst other things, a credible and reliable corporate citizen it must demonstrate this by how it responds and conducts itself during the Royal Commission.

This hearing will shock the tight-knit community of Canberra. Marist College Canberra is highly regarded, not just by the families who have and still attend the school, but how Marist contributes and interacts with the Canberra community. People will want to know what happened and what measures are in place to ensure the Marist today is not the Marist from decades ago.

During this hearing the Marist Brothers will come forward and attempt to explain what happened. This is particularly grueling, because these Marist Brothers were not the ones who committed the crimes, or in most cases the ones who dealt with the matter, but they are the ones now wanting to make things right.

Over the past few days many of you would have read about the questions we have asked two of the five victims who have appeared in the Canberra hearing. These questions have not been about the abuse the victims suffered. There is no question in anyone's mind associated with the Marists Brothers or the TJHC that these men were abused by Chute and Sutton.

Blog



What the questions go to is the witnesses recollections of what they told certain people in the school system about the abuse and how they responded.

This aspect is a difficult and delicate part of the hearings and it goes to revealing what actually did happen in the handling of these abuse cases. We obviously don't wish to place people under undue stress and has only happened with two or three witness since the Commission stated its public hearings late last year.

Our hope is that at the conclusion of this hearing survivors will feel they have been heard and genuinely cared for. We also hope that these devastating experiences have led to current child protection policies and procedures and that those protocols will, in fact, provide the best possible protection for children.

Last week I welcomed Archbishop Denis Hart's announcement that the Hon Neville Owen has been appointed Chair of the Truth Justice and Healing Council. Mr Owen's appointment follows the death of the Council's inaugural Chair, the Hon Barry O'Keefe, a few months ago.

Mr Owen has a distinguished career as a judge, barrister, solicitor and reformer and has worked closely with many charities and educational bodies. I am really looking forward to working with Mr Owen and the positive and wise spirit he will bring to the deliberation of the Council. He is a man of faith and highly regarded in the Australian community.

Also last week the Royal Commission announced it will hold a public hearing in Sydney on 24 June into the response of the Catholic Diocese of Wollongong to the allegations of child sexual abuse against John Gerard Nestor. I know the Diocese of Wollongong has been gathering detailed information so that the Church continues its honest and upfront approach in responding to the Royal Commission.

Francis Sullivan

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