

TRANSCRIPT

ABC Radio National Breakfast

Francis Sullivan, CEO, Truth Justice and Healing Council

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Introduction: There is growing frustration that the inquiry into child sexual abuse will not be able to deliver an adequate national redress scheme to compensate victims.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse will begin the second week of public hearings into abuse at the St Joseph's Neerkol Orphanage in Rockhampton today.

It's alleged that sadistic punishments and sexual abuse were rife at the orphanage that was run by the Sisters of Mercy from 1885 to 1978.

Former residents have detailed some of the most horrific accounts of abuse the Commission has heard to date, and victims are angry that the Commonwealth Government has refused to support the Commission's proposal for a national redress scheme.

Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council speaks to *RN Breakfast's* Ellen Fanning from Rockhampton.

Ellen Fanning: Welcome back to RN Breakfast Francis.

F Sullivan: Thank you Ellen.

EF: I just want to start by talking about the terrible evidence that you sat through last week. St Joseph's, this depraved place, children regularly sodomised, nuns did nothing to stop it – and this involved the entire hierarchy, and if you like to foot soldiers of the church in this major regional centre.

Do you ever lose faith in your church as an institution, when it has been at times and in places and as an organisation that has really harboured and protected the most debased criminals?

FS: Well last week was a dreadful week Ellen. You've already mentioned it. The very brave people who come forward and tell their stories in the public domain, are doing us a real favour as a community because this stark, ugly truth needs to come out so that we can understand as a community what it will take to actually redress this whole situation.

Obviously as a Catholic I've been angry and devastated about how the Catholic Church, over many decades, has mishandled, and at times knowingly kept things secret. Many Catholics want this Royal Commission to demonstrate that the Church is finally coming forward and telling the truth and explaining itself and then being part of a solution of a just outcome for victims.

EF: Is it hard to hear that evidence and play the advocacy role you play?

FS: It's extraordinarily difficult to sit in that room. It's a very gruelling exercise. And you know I feel bad saying that because, you know, my reactions are nothing compared to what people are living with. You know, we think about this as history. For a lot of victims, it's not history, it's a daily experience still of having to live with that trauma and that damage.

EF: Yeah. It's sickening, isn't it to hear what these people went through. And in a sense that is the easiest part for the Royal Commission to ask people to come forward and take this anguishing step of telling their stories. The real work of the Commission is to devise what to do in response to the evidence. Are we at the point where it may be possible that engineering a robust, just response is not going to be possible?

FS: Well, I think all of us are living with hope. I mean there are two parts to the Royal Commission. One is to enable people to tell their stories to see if reconciliation can begin. The other is to put in place just outcomes and better administration in these institutions.

Now we're over the halfway mark so sure, we've got to look at the second part. But at the end of the day, institutions across Australia: the Catholic Church, government institutions, other churches, charities, all of them are now being seen to have had child sex abuse occur within their walls. All of the institutions now need to put their shoulder to the wheel. And it requires now our political leaders... Ellen the problem so far is that the Royal Commission is being played with by bureaucracies.

Our political leaders are silent. It doesn't matter if it's a prime minister, an opposition leader or a premier. They need to step up now and say what they will do for people who have been abused in all institutions. The proposal that we're putting forward and the Royal Commission is putting forward is for a national redress scheme. If I could just quickly why that's important? It doesn't matter where you were abused, when you were abused or how you were abused, over these decades. You need an opportunity to get proper, generous compensation.

Now the Catholic Church has been running compensation schemes. It's worked for some, it hasn't for others.

The proposal of a national scheme would mean that all institutions would pay for the abuse that happened within THEIR institution. So it doesn't mean that any taxpayer's money will go to paying for compensation of abuse in the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church pays for all its compensation, just as the Anglicans would, just as the state government of... children services would. We need an independent.... You really need an independent umpire.

EF: Mm.

FS: Someone, or a panel who can investigate, determine what happened, determine how much people should be paid. And then it's over to institutions, including the Catholic Church to pay the full freight on that.

EF: But the Federal Government response – its submission to the Royal Commission is this: Look. A national system would only serve to frustrate the victims. It's too complex. It's too time-consuming and costly. Look, the Federal Government may not even have the legal and constitutional authority to act. And, it's up to the institutions involved where there's a moral hazard if the Feds get in the way. What do you say to that?

FS: I'd say a few things. Firstly, it's somewhat breathtaking that the Commonwealth Government which established this Royal Commission, should so quickly dismiss the first real recommendation that may come from the Royal Commissioners. That doesn't show a lot of political leadership. Remember, this is a social issue in Australia, not a bureaucratic issue. Secondly, if you want a national system, it requires the attorneys generals – Commonwealth and state – to establish, right now, a working party, answering back to themselves and to their leaders, how you do that...

EF: ...not to sound cynical about it, but if this Royal Commission reports to the Federal Government and to all the state governments, cannot coordinate something as straight forward as a National Working With Children Check – not a state-by-state one, a national Working With Children Check, I mean we're not talking about single gauge railways here – what hope could you possibly have that they could come together for a national redress system?

FS: Well its interesting, a few years ago, many people in the disability field were really panicked about the fact that there'd been no political resolve for a National Disability Insurance Scheme. And now, one is beginning. We've heard before about the problems between Commonwealth and state. It's about political leadership. But more importantly Ellen – and at least your show is doing it – many people who are victims, have no voice in this. There are many people out there who want to see people get access to a generous compensation scheme. They have no voice. And we still don't hear from political leaders....

EF: ...all right. Can I ask you this? I don't wish this to sound flippant, it's a serious question. Is there a case if a national system, a system of just redress is in doubt, for the Commission to actually suspend public hearings? And here's why. It's an ethical point. Can the Commission really continue to put victims through the trauma of giving evidence, if there's no genuine prospect of justice and reparation?

FS: Well I don't know, you'd have to ask them...

EF: What's your view?

FS: I'd say this much. At least from the Catholic C perspective, we have a redress scheme. It's not... It hasn't served everybody well, it's served some people well.

In the face of nothing else then the Catholic Church and others will need to reform what they are doing. But that won't satisfy people who haven't been abused in the Catholic Church. And I think it's imperative that the political leaders back in the Royal Commission. That's why it was established.

EF: Mmmm

FS: And I'm with you. I think we do face now a massive ethical issue. There's no point having an inquiry. There's no point running the risk or re-traumatising victims who come forward. There's no point in giving victims false hope, simply to make... say policy makers... feel good.

We need a situation where our political leaders realise that there is a social issue that has to be addressed. We're doing it with domestic violence. We need to do it for people who have been abused in institutions.

EF: Francis thanks so much for making time for RN Breakfast this morning.

FS: Thanks very much Ellen.

EF: Francis Sullivan, CEO Truth Justice and Healing Council.

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The Truth Justice and Healing Council is coordinating the Catholic Church's response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

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