

Royal Commission Case Study 50

Catholic Church Final Hearing



Tuesday 7 February 2017 – Day 2

Day two of the Royal Commission's hearing into case study 50 saw lively discussion about a number of the cultural and structural issues in the church which may have led to the sexual abuse of children.

The morning commenced with evidence from Dr Thomas Doyle, a Dominican priest from the USA and canon lawyer, author and consultant in areas of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. Dr Doyle's experience with 'actual' cases spans 33 years in the USA and other countries.

Dr Doyle described a clerical church culture of deep secrecy that protected the perpetrator and the institutional church, evaded accountability and responsibility, moved pedophile priests and blamed victims.

He described his efforts to communicate the gravity of the problem of the sexual abuse of children in the church with the Church hierarchy in the USA. While working in the Papal Nuncio's office in Washington DC he provided a report to the papal nuncio in 1985 and through him, to Rome, graphically detailing at least one case.

As public awareness grew, the bishops sought Doyle's advice on how to deal with the problem. He provided them with an extensive report which included the definition of pedophilia and the fact that it cannot be cured.

The groundbreaking report was approved by the nuncio, but blocked by the US bishops' conference. Doyle subsequently sent a copy to every US bishop in late 1985. He was sacked from his role in the nuncio's office for his advocacy work with victims. He was told if he wanted a career in the church he should change his area of expertise.

He has since spoken to thousands of victims and their families. He said one of the massive holes in the Church's approach today is the failure to comprehend the profound spiritual damage done to victims, their family and the community.

He described a clerical culture that protects bishops at all costs from embarrassment and from being lowered in the esteem of the community. One of the main causal factors has been the prioritizing of image, and the authority of the institutional church over the welfare of victims. He described a 'clerical subculture that has infected church culture', of a power structure that is used to 'control and scare victims'.

He said the practice of secrecy was relatively recent in terms of church history.

He said mandatory celibacy has prevented the personal development of priests and religious and that it may have been a factor in the sexual abuse of children.

The afternoon panel included Dr Michelle Mulvihill, Managing Director and Principal consultant, Corpsych Australia, Professor Neil Ormerod, Professor of Theology, Australian Catholic University and Professor Frank Moloney, Senior Professorial Fellow at Catholic Theological College.

Referring to the data released by the Royal Commission yesterday, Professor Ormerod said abuse is more prevalent in male religious orders with access to vulnerable children. He observed the interaction of vulnerability, power and domination, noting that private powerlessness and public dominance is a potent mix which could be sexually alluring. He said effective pastoral supervision, in line with other professions who work with emotionally distressed people was an effective way to mitigate this, but that it's not happening in the Catholic Church.

All panelists agreed priests should have ongoing formation and supervision.

Professor Ormerod referred to the Archdiocese of Adelaide and to its low number of claims. He noted the decision of the former archbishop of Adelaide, Leonard Faulkner to forego an auxiliary bishop in favour of setting up a pastoral team which included a number of lay and religious women. He suggested that this model was a reason for the low number of claims.

Professor Maloney noted a regression since changes following Vatican II to a more conservative approach.

Dr Mulvihill called for mandatory registration of active priests, in line with other professional practices in Australia.

Professor Ormerod warned against a culture of impotence, where change is mandated, but not implemented.

Professor Moloney discussed the complexities arising from a multicultural priesthood.

Professor Moloney observed that change is on its way for the Catholic Church in Australia, that good things are happening, but it's like a turning wheel that needs to change direction. He said the return to a conservative approach in Church institutions and many of the seminaries is a major stumbling block to reform. "We've come a long way," he said, "but the wheel's still turning in the wrong direction".

The hearing continues tomorrow.

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