

Royal Commission Case Study 50

Catholic Church Final Hearing



Tuesday 21 February 2017 - Day 11

The panel discussion on Day 11 of the Catholic Church's final hearing was attended by bishops with responsibility for various dioceses and regional archdioceses.

Attending were Archbishop Christopher Prowse, Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn; Archbishop Julian Porteous, Archbishop of Hobart; Bishop Eugene Hurley, Bishop of Darwin; Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv, Bishop of Parramatta; Bishop Christopher Saunders, Bishop of Broome; and Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, Bishop of the Maronite Diocese of Australia.

All panelists strongly supported a national redress scheme, noting the importance of separating reparation from the pastoral context.

It was noted that all the panelists supported the establishment of Catholic Professional Standards Ltd and told the Commission that it was important that the company was financially backed and its recommendations embraced.

Other issues discussed included the extent to which the structure, governance and a culture of the Church may have contributed to the sexual abuse of children, and the church's reform efforts in light of the Royal Commission's work.

The panelists were also questioned about issues of accountability and transparency; mandatory reporting; clericalism and the abuse of power; a tendency to the restoration of the traditional model of church; celibacy; seminary and ongoing formation, including psycho sexual screening; the culture of secrecy; the limited role of women and the laity in Church leadership; training of overseas-born priests; and current procedures for the administration of the sacrament of reconciliation, particularly to children.

Archbishop Prowse described the benefits of the newly established Safeguarding Institute in the Canberra Goulburn Archdiocese, saying it has led to greater transparency and better access to information, especially for survivors. Noting that his Archdiocese spans NSW and the ACT he said he was in favour of child protection legislation uniformity.

Archbishop Porteous spoke of the approach he had taken when in his former role as rector of the Good Shepherd seminary, describing how he sought to create a positive environment for students, including improving priestly fraternity, encouraging humility and the capacity to serve. In this context, he described clericalism as the abuse of the priestly culture.

He told the Commission that in his view responsibility for abuse sat with the individual, but that church structure, culture and governance historically may also have contributed to the occurrence

of abuse. He noted that where priests had a poor understanding of celibacy due to poor formation he felt this may also have been a contributing factor.

He also told the Commission about the “Safe Communities” program under development in the Archdiocese, which when in place will ensure all Catholic entities operating in the Archdiocese can test their child safety protocols against the Royal Commission’s Ten Key Elements of Child Safe Organisations.

Bishop Eugene Hurley outlined his recently distributed pastoral letter providing instruction for the safe practice of the sacrament of reconciliation in the Diocese of Darwin. He noted that all people, including priests, are mandatory reporters in the Northern Territory, a requirement he said he expects his priests to take seriously.

Bishop Hurley described to the Commission his positive personal understanding and approach to celibacy, noting that the true role of a priest is to be at the service of others and that this is the best way to exclude clericalism.

Comparing the abuse that occurred in the Church to the revelations regarding Don Dale detention centre in the Northern Territory, Bishop Hurley told the Commission that he considered that the abuse was a betrayal of trust, an abuse of power, which occurred against a background of a lack of supervision and an acceptance of less than best practice.

Bishop Hurley pointed to changes made in his diocese that were intended to prevent abuse as far as possible, including strict safeguarding practices, and the enculturation of overseas personnel.

Bishop Long told the Commission that he had been born in Vietnam and arrived in Australia as a refugee by boat in 1981, aged 20.

He has a number of overseas born priests in his diocese and currently has 16 candidates studying in his diocesan seminary. He told the Commission he was concerned about the trend towards more conservative candidates, operating under a ‘perfect society’ model of the Church promoted by previous pontificates, where the ‘pecking order’ was heavily tilted towards the ordained with the laity at the bottom. “We need to dismantle that model of church,” he said. He spoke of his belief that Pope Francis is leading the way towards reform.

He said the modern church lacked robust governance processes and denied full participation by the faithful, and women in particular in Church governance. “For my part... as a bishop, I need to lead the way in promoting the Church as a *communio*, a discipleship of equals, that emphasises relationships rather than power,” he said. The panelists lent varying levels of support to Bishop Long’s view.

After lunch Bishop Saunders, described the benefits and challenges of his regional diocese, which spans a large geographic area in the north of Western Australia. He described the increased vigilance now present in the diocese in light of the revelations of the Royal Commission.

Bishop Saunders shared his thoughts on why the abuse happened and his view of the Church’s response. He said clericalism – understood as the abuse of power and authority – was a significant problem, which he attributed to an immature, redundant understanding of Church. Consistent with the view of Bishop Long, Bishop Saunders observed that the Pope is encouraging a move towards Church as a community of service, and away from the concept of privilege.

Bishop Tarabay heads the Maronite diocese, an Eastern Rite diocese of the Church, which culturally largely consists of people with a Lebanese, Syrian or Egyptian background. Bishop Tarabay told the Commission that 21 of the 54 priests of his diocese are married men, and emphasis is placed on Maronite priests living in community. He described the formation currently being undertaken by seminarians, some of whom are married and others who have chosen to become celibate priests.

Late in the day, Bishop Long described the personal impact he felt after hearing the stories of many victims of abuse while in Melbourne and of nine victims since becoming Bishop in Parramatta. He also revealed that he had been a victim of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy after his arrival in Australia. He said these experiences had encouraged him to seek justice, dignity and healing for all survivors.

The hearing continues tomorrow at 10:00am.

CONTACT: Michael Salmon, Communications Director, 0417 495 018