

Royal Commission

The Majellan's editor Michael Gilbert discusses the scandal of sexual abuse within the Church. He reflects on the implications for our membership of the Church and on the reckoning which must come from the Royal Commission.

"I am so ashamed. My Church, the one that I love, has provoked the Government into calling a Royal Commission". One person's expression; the thoughts of many. Most Catholics share these feelings of shame, bewilderment and anger about the child abuse scandals that have come to light in the secular media.

As a priest, I feel nothing but shame and sorrow for the victims of this abuse and for their families. Given present circumstances, there is little a Catholic priest can credibly say about this matter. Yet, we must. We must face the truth and seek rectification and reform.

The Royal Commission will rightly cast its net much wider than the confines of the Catholic Church. Sadly, the sexual abuse of children is found across broad sections of the general population: amongst families, relatives, clergy, teachers etc. Nevertheless, our Catholic Church must honestly confront those particular factors that allowed some of its priests and religious to abuse children. We should support the work of the Royal Commission. It is an opportunity to lance a festering institutional boil.

Without doubt, the Royal Commission will deliver some harsh judgements and make difficult determinations. However, the penalties it may wish to impose will seem light when measured against

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Christ's judgement on those who have harmed one of his 'little ones' and caused them to lose faith. Scandals, Jesus tells us, are inevitable; but, woe to those who cause them. This meek and peaceful man was moved to use violent metaphors: - a millstone draped around a neck and the offender cast into the sea. He declares that maiming oneself (amputation of hand, foot or eye) is preferable to inflicting harm on the vulnerable.

Our attention and care must first go to the victims and their families. Prodigious efforts must go to finding ways to heal them of their grief and pain and to restore their dignity. The damage done to them is past estimation: the loss of childhood innocence, the falsely imposed sense of guilt, the burden they are unable to

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share. Many victims suffer disorders that afflict them for a lifetime: self-image destroyed; bouts of anxiety; nightmares; disorganised feelings. Some are unable to be responsive within the intimacy of marriage. They mourn the loss of innocence and diminished adolescent development.

Most victims are usually vulnerable persons who yearn for care and understanding. They are the very persons who ought to be a pastoral priority for a priest or religious. Instead, their neediness was exploited.

Appropriately the families of victims feel horrified. Their faith is sorely tested. They lose trust in the Church. It is right to be angry with church officials who mishandled or neglected to properly address this behaviour. While child sexual abuse is discovered in all sections of society it is all the more galling to be discovered in an institution that lays claim to the highest standards of morality. Priests and religious are more culpable than others. They, in the name of God, hold the spiritual and moral lives of their flock in sacred trust.

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Children deserve to be protected by the Church. That protection ought to be extensive and unequivocal. Whenever someone is abused, someone else's eyes are closed. Victimisation depends on the silence of others who knew, suspected or should have known but said or did nothing. We all need to be more alert, more noticing, and more courageous in speaking out.

The Church is damaged by these scandals. In the secular mind it is perceived as a corrupt institution that protects perpetrators. The Royal Commission will determine the truth of these allegations. In recent decades the Church has made strenuous efforts to address and correct this abuse. Policies and protocols have been developed and applied. There are procedures to handle complaints. It will be up to the Royal Commission to examine their relevance and effectiveness.

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The Royal Commission may cause us embarrassment but it is also an opportunity to put things right. Our religious leaders must take a primary role in this process. If the Church is to regain credibility, total transparency is required. Offenders

must be weeded out. Candidates for the priesthood and religious life must be chosen wisely. Clergy and religious must be more than clerical functionaries and act as worthy ambassadors of a servant Christ. All members of the Church must actively join with victims of abuse and their families, listen to them and work for their recovery.

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Families have an important role in this process of recovery. It is difficult for parents to know what to say or do when their children become aware of this crisis in the Church. Honesty is the best policy. One can't hide the failures and sinfulness of the Church; nor its holiness and depth of faith and love. Parents need to be vigilant and protective of their children and monitor their associations including those with clergy and religious. Children who report unsavoury behaviour are to be believed and the matter properly investigated by parents and the appropriate authority. Teach children about the dangers of association with adults. Assure them that the majority of priests and religious are good and dedicated.

The Royal Commission will be a painful and embarrassing time for us Catholics. But, we must face up to our failure to live up to the standards of the Gospel. There are no shortcuts. No dissembling. It is necessary for us to know why so many clergy and religious have engaged in the sexual abuse of children and to discover and remedy the conditions that fostered this outrageous behaviour.

This is not a time to walk away from the Church. Rather, it is a time to turn to God more deeply. It is a time of repentance and lamentation. Humbly before God we lament the misfortunes and failures of the people of God and earnestly petition divine assistance and deliverance from the evils that afflict our Church. If it takes a Royal Commission to achieve this, so be it. ■

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