

Child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church in Australia

Healing medicine: Collective responsibility



ARCHBISHOP'S MESSAGE
ARCHBISHOP
CHRISTOPHER PROWSE

DEAR people of God in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is over its halfway mark. By 2017, after five years, it would have completed possibly 50 public hearings. It is estimated that about one third of these hearings would have examined Catholic schools, dioceses, parishes and other Catholic organisations.

I am grateful for the work of the Royal Commission. It has shone a bright light of truthful investigation into a shameful and disgraceful area of our shared Church life. Over a long period of perhaps 60-70 years, we are now aware and condemn the acts of some Church personnel against too many of society's most vulnerable children. Their actions sicken us. Their betrayal of the most basic of Gospel tenets is absolutely appalling. Humbly, once again, we ask for the forgiveness of the survivors, families and friends.

Indeed, the real heroes arising from this darkness are the survivors themselves. Over the years, sitting down and listening to many sad testimonies has been a most challenging experience. What has been revealed, however, is not simply their direct abuse by cowardly Church personnel. They have courageously spoken about the indirect re-traumatisation by the wider Church over the years. Some survivors have spoken most positively of Church officials once the abuse had been reported. Too many, regrettably, have spoken of being confronted by a brutal and defensive Church governance structure that refused to take responsibility. Some survivors have felt part of the problem by remote Church leaders, who have delegated responses to well resourced legal teams. Some survivors bemoan the Church's poorly



The new IPSS team - from left to right, Helena Kesina, Meg Lillicrap, Jane Cronan and Matt Casey.

PHOTO: LOUI SESELJA

managed follow-up that lacked any moral leadership. Rather than being subjects of Church healing, too many victims have spoken of feeling like objects of a powerful and closed Church culture that is prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to protect its clergy and reputation.

However confronting it is for all of us to hear such comments, we thank these survivors for their truth-speaking and honesty. We believe what they are telling us. It is like an 'examination of conscience' for us all. It reveals an appalling recording of collective irresponsibility of the Church at various times and levels.

We need to reflect carefully and respond practically in the times ahead on the ethical/moral and theological implications for us of these distressing testimonies. All of us are involved in this. There is a kind of collective responsibility to help heal what in the past has been some sort of diseased social arrangements in regard to child sex abuse by Church personnel. Among so many other aspects, according to the above testimonies, it seems to have marginalised almost automatically many victims to the periphery of our pastoral care. This needs our most urgent and immediate attention and action.

In regard to the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, I wish to thank those responsible over many years for the enormous work done in the area of professional standards. In more recent times, I have instigated and wish to fully implement a governance structure that brings our survivors of sex abuse from the margins into the centre of our pastoral response. It is a whole of Archdiocese strategy. It will ensure we offer what the survivors are asking for: the reassurance that all our communities are safe, our children and vulnerable people are truly cared for, and that the spiritual dimension of all we do is not compromised by unethical and criminal behaviour.

I have called this new structure our Institute for Professional Standards and Safeguarding. It is still a work in progress. In this edition of the *Catholic Voice*, you will read further details about this pastoral initiative. You may wish to contact my office (archbishop@cg.org.au), Matt Casey (matt.casey@cg.org.au) and Jane Cronan (jane.cronan@cg.org.au) with your feedback. I hope each one of us has learnt lessons from the Royal Commission so far, and are open to its future recommendations. Also, we are learning from other Australian and overseas protocols. My

hope is that this new Institute will certainly respond to the needs of victims, their support and healing. It is liaising very closely with the police and governmental bodies set up to protect children. It will also ensure that all compliance issues regarding our personnel who work with children and vulnerable people are checked and verified. Also, and more broadly, the Institute will continue to highlight the faith dimension of victim support, as well as child protection, and lead the Archdiocese in the training and development of all of us in child safeguarding.

My prayer and determination, as this Institute for Professional Standards and Safeguarding establishes itself fully, is that it will be a genuine healing symbol with credibility and best practice of our taking up collective responsibility. The brutal facts of child sex abuse within our Church community over the years cannot be denied. It is an abhorrent and shameful social sickness, which ought find no place in our midst. We rely on the healing medicine found only in our union with Jesus, our Saviour and merciful Lord, to carry out what is urgently required.

Archbishop Christopher Prowse
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