

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse:

Submission:

In terms of addressing child abuse within the Churches, the Catholic Church's hierarchical structure and governance is very much a positive aspect of this expansive world-wide institution. In an ideal world the structure of leadership demands accountability and engenders professionalism, morale, order, ethical rigour, heroic witness. It should be a work of protection and salvation of all- for all of us at one stage or another - at whose service the Church exists for. It has stood the test of time above all other institutions and has been at its strongest when it has closely lived and preached the Gospel of Christ with the Pope as its head.

But today, in 2016, we now know that a bitter period has been exposed, and neither theology, doctrinal law, canon law nor the role of the Vatican has anything to do with it.

Nor has it anything to do with the discipline of mandatory celibacy for Catholic priests. For there are more paedophiles amongst married men, and this unfortunately, is yet to be uncovered, for children often do not speak out until they are adults many years later.

I speak as someone who has known friends as well as relatives who have been sexually abused -outside as well as inside the Catholic Church, so my opinions stem from these experiences.

I will only address those issues that I know most about.

1. Firstly, this enormous evil is of a cultural nature; for, right across the western world in particular, minors have, or are, being sexually abused. Even in poorer countries, we know of child sexual slaves as young as 3 years from Asia to Africa whose numbers are in the millions. To say that sexual abuse somehow originated or was perpetrated within the Catholic Church would be entirely erroneous.

2. Seminaries: leading up to the 1960's most of the seminaries were conducted with an ascetic and disciplined rigour that was perhaps far more professional in its judgement of appropriate candidates for ordination. After that time a period of confusion and popular psychology reigned.

Men did not suddenly develop aberrant sexual behaviour after 6 years of seminary training. Practically all paedophile candidates had psychosexual problems before they entered the institution and I find it difficult to believe that no- one within the institution noticed the oddities of their character during that training, or acted on their suitability for ordination. The seminary or the religious novitiate is the place where, via spiritual direction and careful discernment, character inadequacies are observed at a close level by experienced leaders and this is where the system failed us.

In some cases the seminarians had been abused themselves and were perpetuating the crime. Why they chose to become Catholic priests is a mystery...but I suspect they thought that it was an escape from a problem that they had no control over. If they were to be ordained, then all would be well!

Others entered the priesthood and religious life specifically to prey on minors – and unfortunately those in leadership did not discover this.

At other times there was a ring of paedophiles that protected one another and facilitated each other's access to children – a more heinous situation for all concerned.

In the 1960's and 1970's, I remember my aunts – both Sisters of Mercy – were only allowed to travel in pairs. This was commonplace amongst religious and was not only a protective measure of one's personal safety and one's character, but also ensured no-one was placed in positions of temptation or inappropriate circumstances. What a great pity that this practise was annulled!

2. Pornography: in monasteries or seminaries where I have heard of paedophile rings or systemic aberrant sexual behaviour I have also heard of a proliferation of pornographic material amongst the members. This is in my opinion, not just a co-incidence.

4. Clericalism and "false loyalty".

There was a period (up to the -1970's, 80's) when it was considered an obligation to 'not bring down scandal on the Church'; to protect its good name at all costs. Until recently, this drove many people, including episcopates and clergy as well as laity to fail to properly address or reveal the failures of many priests or religious.

Amongst the lay, practising Catholics loved their Church, and it was at one time not considered "moral" to expose a person's destructive behaviour, no matter what the behaviour. This was not contained to clerics, it was right across the spectrum.

There was also a misplaced sense of "Father must be right – because he said so" This too has contributed to the failures of the Church in crimes against children. That sense of trust or prudence by parents was also misplaced: why parents would place young children in the care of a male religious, alone, unsupervised, for even a short period of time is surely questionable. However in boarding schools – where the majority of abuses known to me took place – is where there was little control of many situations and this should have been prevented. This appears to be a thing of the past, now that prudential guidelines and laws have been enacted.

5.. As stated previously, it was not a common occurrence that children spoke of an adult sexually abusing them while still young. Sometimes they were threatened by the abuser, sometimes bribed. In any case they were simply children at the mercy of a grown person who had much more power than they did rights. Also many children knew that most would disbelieve these allegations.

And many did not - Bishops, priests, and leaders of every other institution. Almost nobody believed that this was possible in the 1960's, 70's or 80's, certainly amongst a 'religious' people in parishes or schools.

They simply could not conceive of the idea.

Among those bishops who were convinced of transgressions of their clergy or religious, I believe that none knew that it was almost totally non-rehabilitative.

None knew that an offending priest required to be removed from situations of temptation, imprisoned or defrocked. In most cases Catholic leaders erred on the side of Mercy – for the Catholic Church is after all, a Church of Mercy! If a priest were truly “caught out” he would most likely plead for mercy. He would swear to his Bishop that he would never offend again...and plead for another chance. Unfortunately, Bishop after bishop many years ago had little idea of the dangers or the path his priest was most likely going to take.

When some bishops knowingly kept moving priests from parish to parish after allegations of offending, it appears they spoke to very few about it, so we do not know how much they understood about the paedophile priest. But the legacy it left has been disastrous for many.

6. In my own experiences it was a particular religious order that proved difficult to accept responsibility or address critical problems in boarding schools. A number of concerned parents were not given a fair hearing when they requested the removal of a number of religious from a certain school, and it was unfortunately outside the Bishop of the diocese’ jurisdiction because of the governance of a religious order. The Provincial of the order was either unconvinced of the allegations, or deliberately protecting his members. In any case, because of the existence of branches of the same religious order outside Australia, some of these religious moved overseas –still being a danger to children – and it took longer to convict and jail them.

7. It was the influence of the media and the instigation of “Melbourne Response” and “Towards Healing” before the turn of this century that really changed the game plan for the Catholic Church. In the light of hundreds of allegations by victims, and public scandal, they were forced to address child sexual abuse systematically and to ensure that this never happens again –not by priest, religious or layperson within the Catholic Church.

The seminaries are far more rigorous, with stringent psychological testing of candidates before being accepted as students, and bishops have taken pains to appoint Rectors and staff of an outstanding ethical, moral and spiritual calibre. Students have a more disciplined structure to their seminary life, which includes less personal freedom and intense spiritual guidance.

A priest today will never enter a home if parents are out, choose never to be alone with any children of any age, and many hear confessions of young students with other adults (eg teachers) close by.

Many confessionals are designed in a manner that prohibits any physical contact between the priest and the penitent, and some confessionals are made of glass, or have large glass panels so that outsiders can see what goes on inside.

We are entering a time now when some children have or will make allegations falsely against priests –or any adults – because of the dialogue that is often in conversations, or because of the media interest that is quickly picked up by a child. There are many dangers now that a person’s good name is destroyed forever.

Hard working priests must naturally protect their own good name at great cost, so do not take risks or place themselves at risk of allegations. Wayward priests are easily caught out in these times! While convictions are still occurring these are largely from offenses long ago.

Having moved house many times - including interstate - 15 times in the last 30 years - I am convinced that child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church has already entered (dark) pages of our history in this country, and that we will not see it again in the near future. The media, which often 'rehashes' past convictions, and the Royal Commission unfortunately treats bishops and Catholic leaders as if they should have been more awake to the occurrence, impact & treatment of child sexual abuse 50-30 years ago. Like everyone else in society, they were not. The media and society treats the Catholic Church as if these criminal acts are still occurring in everyday parish and school life. They are not.

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