

RELIGION

Royal Commission a sign of the times for the Church

PAT POWER NOVEMBER 13, 2012

The Prime Minister took the only course open to her in agreeing to a Royal Commission into child sexual abuse in our country. There has been more than enough media coverage to convince any fair-minded person of the terrible damage done through the abuse of children.

Over the past 20 years I have listened to people who have suffered such abuse, sometimes many years ago, and every time I hear a heartrending story I see another facet of the horror of this criminal behaviour.

The loss of childhood innocence, the secrecy which means little ones carry a burden they can share with no one, the misguided sense of guilt they often carry for many years, blaming themselves for what someone else has done to them, their shame before God; all of which may be compounded at times when they do try to unburden their troubled souls and find they are not believed or understood.



Some experience failed marriages; speaking to such people it becomes clear that sexuality, which is meant to be God's joyous gift, has been a source of confusion and hurt because of their destructive childhood experiences. Every person's experience will be different, but I believe the present publicity, painful though it be, will give more people the opportunity to unburden themselves and thus take the first steps towards finding healing and peace.

Whatever form the Royal Commission takes, opportunity will be given to those who have suffered abuse to be heard and taken seriously, in such a way that not only will their own individual case be dealt with, but systems can be put in place to afford children greater protection in the future.

I welcome the fact that the Royal Commission's scope will be wider than the confines of the Catholic Church. The abuse of children is a much wider issue. At the same time, I believe it important that Catholics as a church face up to the particular factors that have contributed to sexual abuse among the ranks of clergy and religious.

The work that has already been done in Australia to address the problem should be acknowledged. Since 1996, the documents *Towards Healing*, which outlines the principles and procedures in responding to complaints of abuse, and *Integrity in Ministry*, which provides guidelines for behaviour, and other measures have attempted to provide justice and healing for all involved.

People such as Sister Angela Ryan and Bishops Geoffrey Robinson, William Morris, Peter Connors and Philip Wilson have been at the forefront of such reform.

Most people, including Catholics, would accept that the Church has been overly negative in its teaching on sexuality. Many Church pronouncements have caused me to question how an all-male celibate voice can realistically enunciate such teaching in a manner which is able to be understood by the whole human family.

Unless women and married people are made part of the governance of the Church, there will continue to be a lack of balance and reality in its teaching, especially around sexuality. I include homosexuality in that critique.

These are painful times to be a Catholic, but if we are humble enough to admit that at times we have got it wrong, sometimes horribly wrong, then there is the opportunity to make reparation and to do all we can to ensure the same mistakes are not repeated.

Opening the Second Vatican Council 50 years ago, Pope John XXIII called on those within the Church to 'read the signs of the times' so as to bring the light of the Gospel on to every aspect of the life of the Church. My hope is that the Royal Commission can become for the Catholic Church a true instrument of grace and healing.



Bishop Pat Power recently retired as Auxiliary Bishop of Canberra-Goulburn.

SUBMITTED COMMENTS