



Speaking the truth in love

Eph 4:15

28 February 2017

Sackcloth and Ashes
A Pastoral Message to the Priests and
People of the Archdiocese of Sydney
Lent 2017

On Friday last the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse concluded its hearings into the Catholic Church. It has been a harrowing experience for the Commissioners, for those called to give evidence, for the wider community that has witnessed these proceedings through the media, but above all for the survivors and their families.

In between the formal sessions I met several times with victims of child sexual abuse, as I have over the last few years. Some had long wanted to be heard by the Catholic community or at least by its leaders, so that we might understand their suffering and they might receive the apology and assistance they deserve.

Some have bravely shared with me things they have told few others. Some are understandably still very angry, their hurt still very raw. Others are still not at the stage of being able to talk much or at all about what happened to them. Some have come to some measure of peace and are now devoting themselves to seeking justice and healing for others.

Gruelling as it has been, this was a Royal Commission we had to have. We needed such external scrutiny and advice to help us deal properly with this problem and recover public confidence. This is why the Church has cooperated so fully with the Royal Commission process. Over the past few weeks alone, more than 70 Church leaders and professionals have appeared before the Commission.

In addition to the stories of wicked perpetrators and innocent sufferers, we have now been presented with aggregated statistics that suggest there was a systemic or cultural problem in the Church, especially in the 1950s, '60s and '70s when abuse rates were so high and many leaders responded so poorly to allegations. We are grateful to the survivors, witnesses, experts and Commissioners for helping us to understand what went so wrong and exploring with us how to ensure such things are never repeated. Understandably, the failure of leadership has caused many to question the validity of our Catholic faith if such crimes can be committed by those acting in the name of the Church. Many have lost their trust in God, the most fundamental trust a human being needs.

People have raised questions about many aspects of Church life, including: the discernment and formation of vocations; continuing support and supervision for clergy, religious and lay-workers; ensuring a clerical culture of service and avoiding an unhealthy clericalism; the role of women in the Church; the theology and canon law of Catholic practices such as celibacy and confession; and so on.

It is fitting that the Royal Commission's investigations of the Catholic Church have come to their denouement just as Lent begins. In ancient times people put on sackcloth and ashes as symbols of mourning and repentance. The discomfort of the coarse material and the desolation of the embers told something of how people felt inside.

We Catholics put ashes on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent and embrace practices such as confession, fasting and other penances, extra prayer and almsgiving, as signs of contrition for our own failures and remorse for our collective failures. Our Scriptures and liturgy speak very directly to us about the need for conversion at this time.

Recently Pope Francis said that "the Catholic Church weeps bitterly for this sin: the sin of what happened [to the victims of child abuse], the sin of failing to help, the sin of covering up and denial, the sin of abuse of power." He expressed the Church's profound shame and sorrow for the suffering caused to the victims. He insisted that the Church must not only preach of but demonstrate by its life reverence for every young person. We must identify child abuse as criminal and evil, repent where there have been institutional failures, ensure victims receive compassion and care, and "commit ourselves completely to making sure such atrocities never again take place in our midst".

I make these words my own. I know the Catholic community of Sydney takes them to heart also. But the survivors of abuse understandably say that words are not enough. They demand action from us to ensure that our practice matches our talk.

There are many good stories to be told about what we are doing to ensure that this does not happen again; that children and the vulnerable can be safe within our church community and that we all have a greater understanding regarding our responsibilities to those in our care. I'm grateful to those working for this and the significant work they have done so far. Most by far of our priests and religious lead lives of generous service to the young and not-so-young, and are appalled by any harm done to those entrusted to their care. Our lay people, too, care deeply about the young and innocent and are helping us improve our structures and culture. I have great confidence in our priests and people, and above all in our God. Through this process of humiliation and purification I believe we will emerge a humbler, holier, more compassionate Church. But we must never be complacent.

So I ask you to consider dedicating each Friday this Lent to participating in Confession and Mass, abstaining from meat, reading Holy Scripture, and/or in other ways praying for the victims of abuse and their families. You might, for instance, think of the victims and the Church passing through this 'vale of tears' when you pray the Hail Holy Queen. The wounds in the Body of Christ can truly be healed by our cooperation with God's grace in acts such as these.

Please join me in praying daily this Lent for justice and healing of victims; for wisdom and compassion for leaders and carers; for repentance by perpetrators; for grace for those tempted to lose faith or hope; for safety for all young people; and for consolation for all those affected.

Yours faithfully in Christ



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