

Francis Sullivan: Reform and renewal after Royal Commission

Fatima Measham 23 January 2018

On 15 December 2017 the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse handed its final report to the Australian Government.

Fatima Measham, consulting editor of *Eureka Street* and host of the *Eureka Street* podcast ChatterSquare, spoke with Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council, the body that is coordinating the Catholic Church's response, to reflect on the journey since the Commission was first announced in November 2012 and to consider what are the next steps for the Church.

Right now, says Francis, 'the whole intensity is well off the boil and in part that is completely understandable because it has been a massively intense period with a lot of heightened tension, and anxieties, and when something comes to an obvious conclusion people breathe a sigh of relief'. With that, however, 'comes the temptation to become complacent'. That is a luxury the Church can ill afford.



Fatima: It has been such a long process. It was only five years ago that [then PM] Julia Gillard announced the Commission, but it feels like ten. Do you think there was a sense of catharsis when the Commission wrapped up?

Francis: I think the biggest sense, if you're looking at it from groups like the Catholic Church, was a sense of fatigue, rather than catharsis. In my mind the Royal Commission was about two years too long and about 20 years too late. The extension of the Royal Commission after the initial three-year period just meant that a lot of the case studies kept on coming and a lot of people, including mainstream media, thought this was just more of the same. And so any value-add from those case studies I think was lost.

Secondly, unfortunately, a lot of people who could have given first hand information about how various cases were dealt with in the Catholic Church were either dead or demented. That's what I mean by 20 years too late. Therefore you had a number of people put into situations of surmising what had happened rather than knowing what had happened. And I think that's been really unfortunate.

With all that comes a fatigue, and I think the media itself ran out of puff, and a lot of mainstream media just wasn't reporting the Royal Commission. The ABC and AAP did because it's their national brief to do so, but unless something was really local and very high profile it didn't gain the prominence it got in the first couple of years.

It grinds people down. And it becomes quite corrosive of people's belief systems, and the way people have placed trust in institutions, in churches, and of how a person has constructed their own faith and belief system around that trust. It's very corrosive. And that vicarious trauma that people then carry can be very significant for a long period of time.

The Catholic Church leaders have railed against the fact that they are continually put in the frame as part of the problem. But the truth is that the Church leadership for decades sought to deny this history, and they sought to somehow contextualise it as a thing of the past. They never fully acknowledged that the culture, structure, processes of the Church were part of the problem. Therefore the trust and credibility in Church leaders has continued to decline, and accelerated in that decline over this whole period, such that people are questioning whether the Church leaders have assimilated what's gone on. I think there's still the question, *Do they get it?* You can only ever tell if individuals get things by what they do rather than what they say. And I think the jury's still out on that.

Let me take you back to the time the Royal Commission was announced and then established. What was your personal sense of the road ahead? Did you anticipate how it played out? Was there anything that surprised you?

The biggest shock I had was the extent of the abuse in the Catholic Church. I really was completely shocked when I first saw the data that was going to be revealed at the Royal Commission. We had in excess of 1800 priests and religious with allegations of abuse against them since the 1950s; we had close to 5000 people with allegations of abuse. That really blew me away.

Where was the shock coming from? Because these stories had been simmering in the background for a long time.

Yeah sure, but to be honest with you when I was asked to do this job, I hadn't really spent a lot of time thinking about all the ramifications of this issue because I had kept it psychologically at a distance, and I thought what was going to be revealed was that maybe the Church had 100 paedophiles or something like that. So therefore when it became quite clear that it wasn't just priests in a certain part of Australia, that it was not only priests but religious brothers — and in some congregations of religious brothers the percentage of members of that order were so high, well above the national figures that you see for this kind of thing among the male population — you really start to think wow, there really is something endemic about this that needs to be brought to the surface and appropriately addressed.

So I was shocked about that, and I was shocked also to be perfectly honest that it took an inquiry like this to have Church leaders, be they bishops or religious leaders, openly admit that yes, there had been cover-up, there had been systematic concealment, there had been basically lying.

How did that sit with you? Among Catholics it wasn't just victims who felt brutally betrayed, but also ordinary Catholics who had not been victims. Do you feel that there was a sense of betrayal for them as well, or even for you?

Absolutely. It really corrodes your confidence in the Church. Because regardless of how high the hurdle is, the hurdle is meant to be high, if you are publicly taking on a role as a moral guardian in the community. And yes I think it has really hurt ordinary Catholics, there has been a huge level of demoralisation. I think it's also been a factor for a lot of Catholics in them withdrawing from participating in the Church. It has become a divide between people's faith and how they will practise it.

And we're not talking here people who are considered radical. We're talking conventional, rusted-on Catholics who have found it increasingly difficult to feel enthusiastic about participating in the Church. Some of this is generational, there's a lot of Catholics over 50 years of age who grew up in a different era, who had a different sort of perspective of how they would belong in the Church, and they've been hurt quite a lot.

How did you absorb and handle these revelations? The stories are quite harrowing and emerged over quite a long period of time. How did you receive them and how did you handle it? Do you still call yourself Catholic?

I do still call myself a practising Catholic. I have a different faith experience than just faith wound up in institutional participation, it's a different story than that for me, it is about seeking a connection with the beyond, and that's a journey I'm on regardless of what is happening. The horror of what's happened to people is very difficult to be continually confronted with, but I was determined that in this last five years my job was to continually try and keep the Catholic Church's face staring straight at that scandal. Not to be party to any process that was somehow trying to contextualise or minimise it, or even rationalise it, but rather to stand there and stare blankly and somewhat nakedly at that scandal and what it's saying to us.

Has the experience changed you in some way?

Yes. Regardless of all the rhetoric that institutions run about how they try to be person-centred — and in this case victim-centred — or focused on the underdog or being there for the battlers, that rhetoric is often simply that: rhetoric. The cultural shifts that are required by institutions, particularly very conservative ones like the Catholic Church, are quite profound, and they are far from underway. I think when you scratch beneath the surface, the Catholic Church is still extraordinarily self-protective, self-justifying, and hypersensitive to criticisms. And I didn't know that when I started this. So when we say that victims have a lot to teach the Church, I really wonder how much the Church really wants to learn, or be taught.

The jury is still out about whether the Catholic leadership can ever be trusted on this matter again. Only last December the Vatican commission that was meant to advise Pope Francis on the protection of minors expired with no reappointments.

I gather there's some process underway. One of the underlying issues in this for the Catholic Church is how pervasive and how insidious clericalism is. And despite all the protestations to the contrary, the clerical cast still see themselves as a group set apart, a group with certain entitlements no one else within the Church has. And they rail against any real critique of that, because they always cast it in hyper-religious terms, when in reality it's a formation of a power faction. Therefore when there is criticism of bureaucratic processes that are basically run by clerics, the clerics just close ranks and say things will be done when they get done. What others would see as bureaucratic bungling, the clericalist model just says these things get done in good time. It's a way of keeping people at a distance, a way of keeping lay people and others in their place.

One of the real problems in the whole scandal is that even in the highest levels in the Catholic Church there still isn't a profound understanding of how the system looked after itself. That's because, even at the level of the Holy Father, the last person to ever give him advice in the area of clerical sex abuse is always a cleric. It's been a problem all along. The clerics managed this problem, mismanaged this problem, concealed the problem, and now they're hoping that people are going to give everybody an even break and start all over again without it fully being understood what's going to be required to make sure it doesn't happen again.

That's the big challenge here. You will find it said, I'm sure, around the place, that there is a fear among the Catholic community that the bishops will just put their heads down now and say let's just get on, we're over that, we've got to talk about the future, there's no point bleating on about the past, there's no point being negative, we've got to be positive. That is seen in many circles as being typically dismissive.

There's no justice in that, in sliding past the hard work that needs to be done.

It's ironic, because the Catholic faith prides itself on being a faith that is in part sourced by the richness of a tradition. That's the nature of the Catholic faith. And now we have a history that should be prophetic for the Catholic Church, and the challenge is how is that voice really going to be listened to and assimilated into how the Church moves along from here.

You hear some bishops, you've got Vincent Long talking about the fact that unless the Church comes to terms with clericalism we're going nowhere. That's correct. There were others who were saying all through the Royal Commission the Church should have been talking about all the good things it does in society.

Well that was not the purpose of the Royal Commission. The Royal Commission was about standing as witnesses to what had happened and making sure the Church didn't drown out the voice of victims, that it stood back and allowed victims to have centre stage and to actually speak into the reality of what's gone on. There are some bishops who have resisted that, who have tried to contextualise it too much, and the mob will work them out.

It was the Catholic bishops [and religious] who convened the TJHC to coordinate the Church's engagement with the Commission. What shaped the TJHC's approach? How did you navigate the history of denialism?

We were very clear from the word go that this was not going to be a PR exercise, we were going to try and speak plainly about how we saw things, and it was not a time to do spin and try to justify things that were unjustifiable. So you had to stick to that, and you had to make sure that in practical ways we weren't running a defensive strategy. And secondly [we were clear] that we'd speak plainly when asked. When questions were put there was no point trying to skirt around what we understood the realities to be.

It required a fair bit of determination and resolve, but I thought it was terribly important from the word go that anything we said as a Council attempted to be representative of what we thought the heart of the Church was about. Because it seemed to me that the Church had acted like an institution in risk management mode, and therefore was speaking from its head, not its heart. The pastoral response, the heartfelt reaction to what had gone on, [regret for] the way victims were always kept at a distance or were basically not believed: all these sorts of things needed to be addressed in the early stages.

It resonated with how ordinary Catholics were seeing this issue, and so our Council in lots of ways was much more a voice about where ordinary Catholics were at than a representative voice of bishops and religious leaders.

You have a public health background. Did any of that training or insight get brought to bear on this process? Many of the survivors ended up having quite severe issues throughout their life.

People on our Council are experts in some of these areas of dealing with victims and with people with psychiatric issues both in childhood and in youth, and some people on our council were direct victims themselves or had family members that were. So a lot of that personal support and advice was invaluable over the years.

The other side of it that I'd stress is that in my own theology [Masters] studies, I'd been fortunate enough to have done studies in the area of liberation theology. So it was terribly important to apply that hermeneutic to what had gone on here. The basic hermeneutic where you critique the institutional assumptions that in many ways had been oppressive rather than liberating for victims. That's still the unfinished work for the Church.

It seems to me that for the Church, a cultural overhaul needs to be the priority.

Right on. I think you can clump it into two elements. The Royal Commission was always going to be looking at what they call best practice administrative issues for institutions in regard to child safety and in regards to the handling of complaints. And these best practice principles will apply to any institution, government, non-government, private, whatever. And so of course, the Catholic Church, like any other institution, will comply with that.

In the last say 20 years, the Catholic Church, in many instances, had been on the leading edge of better practice in the handling of complaints, in the establishment of prevention strategies and detection strategies, and the education of staff and parents. If you look at that as the process end, I think the Catholic Church is not found wanting, generally, in this Royal Commission.

But when you look at the cultural side of the Church, the reasons why concealment occurred, the reasons why individuals acted the way they did, the way in which there was a permissiveness in part of the culture about what had occurred, these are sort of deeper questions that only the institution itself can deal with.

That's the unfinished business. That's the area in which the Church leaders have to step up and show that they get it. Because the fact that there were child abusers in the Catholic Church, horrific though it may be, when you look at all the facts, it's not something that is beyond the plausible. Institutions have people like this in them. The real problem has been that there was so much cover-up and concealment, and the drivers of that is where the conversation has to begin.

It's interesting you say the Church has been on the leading edge of changes to better protect children. We don't hear that. It seems to be the case that the scepticism or even hostility toward the Church is precisely about that culture, about people not being convinced there has been a change of heart.

I don't think the Church leaders have done enough to demonstrate what changes have occurred. I don't think the Catholic community has any idea the effort that has gone into this in the last 20 years, the resources that have been put in place, the amount of money that has been paid out to victims, the programs that have been provided to support people. The Church has done very little [to communicate] this, partly because they've been ashamed of the fact that they had to. The trouble is it then becomes this vicious cycle.

So the first point is that the Church hasn't been upfront about what's happened and what it has done to respond. The second is that the cultural questions around power and participation in the Church, around who gets to decide what's going on and how things are determined, go to more issues than just child sex abuse, and [the child sex abuse issue has] tapped into a lot of that discontent. That's why some people in institutional settings in the Church try to contain that fallout. They think 'Oh my God, now it will all get out of control.'

In terms of change and restoring trust, it seems we can't just leave it to Catholic Church leaders, to the bishops, to actually lead on this, and I wonder whether there's space for lay people moving forward.

Absolutely. The leadership model has got to be bishops and laypeople standing shoulder to shoulder, looking in the same direction, to a future that is shared and mutual. We can't be a model that is purely clerical and hierarchical, where laypeople of competency feel shut out. It won't work. The first thing we

need is participatory models of decision making. Not models where clerics hold veto power. We need to have models of the Church where everyone is mutually engaged, not hierarchically organised.

What does that look like at a parish level for instance?

Well let's go back to some of the models that used to be around. How many dioceses have diocesan pastoral councils? How many of them have effective parish councils where priests and laypeople are together planning the pastoral needs of that local community? My hunch is that in a lot of cases these are dying off because there's a lack of enthusiasm, and the lack of enthusiasm comes from probably past failure.

Equally, when we're talking about the participation of laypeople, how are our expressions of church properly integrated into the daily lives of that community, rather than being seen as a separate add-on at the end of the week? People go to yoga classes and book clubs as ways of connecting with people; how many of those happen inside the parish? There are different ways of being church. There are new ways in which people are trying to find support, connection, deep and meaningful conversation and reflection in their lives, and one would hope that's going to be the way the church expresses itself in a post-modern world. It's about saying let's be open to the expressions of how people seek truth, goodness and beauty together.

Even though the Royal Commission has concluded, it's not the end, is it? It feels as though we've only just started doing the real work.

No, it was an inquiry, and an inquiry by its very nature raises issues, and raises a lot of unfinished business. The governance challenge in the Catholic Church is to pick up from that inquiry and now look at how it will use that as a vehicle for reform.

Remember, the tendency for conservative organisations is to manage reform to its lowest denominator. The thing the Catholic Church needs to do is to use this as a moment where reform will refresh and renew. That is it. Because to manage this away will only ensure that the cynicism and the lack of trust in the Church will be fomented and continued. It has to be used as a stimulus for reform.

Even with the plenary council that's coming up, again, if they're not careful it will look like a managed performance, and it can't be that, if we honestly believe that the spirit talks through the community.

The thing that Francis always talks about is that we need to be a discerning Church. We need to learn what listening requires and then what the obligation is after it, and it's not about perpetually adding more of the same.



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Photo of Francis Sullivan by Beth Doherty