

PETER JOHNSTONE. Should Australian Catholic Bishops be Trusted?

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“The bond of trust between the laity and their bishops has been severely impaired...a serious erosion of trust in the hierarchical leadership of the church”.- leading Australian Catholic theologian Professor Neil Ormerod of the Australian Catholic University in [Fairfax papers on Sunday 11 February 2018](#).

Many Catholics have become demanding of their Church leaders following the starkly inadequate responses of the Australian bishops to the findings of the Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It is remarkable that the bishops have focussed on processes and procedures, basic changes that did not need a Royal Commission, while failing to address the culture of unaccountable clericalist leadership exposed by the Commission – the actual basis of the cover up and protection of paedophiles.

Inexplicably, that culture of unaccountable clericalist leadership seems to be continuing in the bishops' response to the Royal Commission. They possibly hope that their focus on the horror of the statistics and the condemnation of paedophiles will distract the faithful from the moral and criminal failings of the Church's leadership and governance.

The bishops are perhaps stunned by the Royal Commission's terrible finding that the Catholic Church accounted for more than 60 per cent of all abuse survivors who reported sexual abuse in a religious institution. But are they so stunned, like rabbits in the headlights, that they are unable to face the dysfunctional governance and urgent reforms identified by the Royal Commission?

The hierarchical leadership of the church has seemingly ignored the Commission's key findings that the Church's dysfunctional governance aggravated the harm done by paedophile priests and religious. The faithful have not been so easily distracted.

The Royal Commission in its final report (- note [Volume 16 – Religious institutions, Book 2 – Catholic Church](#)) said that it was

satisfied that there is significant documentary and archival evidence of a long history of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious going back to the earliest centuries of the Church . . . (and noted) the relevance of that history in our examination of current contributing factors.

In its extensive analysis of 'current contributing factors', the Commission rejected the claim by Cardinal Pell that *“the faults overwhelmingly have been more personal faults, personal failures, rather than structures”* (the simplistic 'bad apple' defence) and pointed to

a combination of theological, historical, cultural and structural or organisational factors in the Catholic Church (that) enabled child sexual abuse to occur in Catholic Church institutions in Australia and contributed to inadequate institutional responses.

The Royal Commission endorsed evidence from an international expert that identified contributing features of the institutional church including

the theology of sexuality, the ecclesiastical structure of power relations and hierarchical authority, clerical culture and seminary formation.

Other evidence identified *‘clericalism as a significant contributing factor . . . to the failure of Catholic Church leaders and other Catholic Church personnel to respond appropriately to allegations of child sexual abuse.’* Clericalism, described as a 'virus' in a submission from Catholics for Renewal, was seen as *“the idealisation of the Catholic priesthood and, by extension, the idealisation of the institutional Catholic Church.”* The Church's own submission (Truth Justice and Healing Council) referred to clericalism as the 'conscious or unconscious concern' to promote the particular interests of the clergy and to protect their privileges and power.

The Commission quotes Australian Jesuit priest and theologian Andrew Hamilton saying that clericalism includes

an emphasis on authority and obedience in relations between higher and lower grades. This was reflected in an aura of awe surrounding the bishop, the assumption that bishops and priests knew best, and in a reluctance to acknowledge or report misconduct by clerics.

These governance ‘contributing factors’ are of course antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. Yet the bishops have failed to address any governance issue, including clericalism, in their responses to date. In-principle commitments to addressing these issues should have been immediate and certainly do not need the comprehensive analysis of the Royal Commission’s report by the TJHC expected ‘early in 2018’ which is still not public.

In the meantime, the only significant initiative taken by Australian bishops has been to start preparing for a Plenary Council in 2020/21, a necessary and overdue initiative for the Australian Church but a long way in the future and not an answer to the present urgent reform needs of the Church. If the plenary council is the bishops’ answer to Commission recommendations that demand immediate actions, actions that can easily be taken now, it can only be seen as an attempt to kick the can down the road a few years to remove the pressure for responsible action now.

Elizabeth Proust, deputy chair of the bishops’ TJHC has [observed](#), “I don’t see any sign that the lessons have been truly learned to the point where the institution of the Church is being questioned by those who’ve got the ability to change it.”

The recommendations of the Royal Commission that address the underlying dysfunctional governance of the Church are compelling, and are not that difficult. The simplest and most urgent ([Recommendation 16.7](#)) is that

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference should conduct a national review of the governance and management structures of dioceses and parishes, including in relation to issues of transparency, accountability, consultation and the participation of lay men and women . . .

The [following 12 recommendations](#), recognising the universal nature of the Church, propose that the Australian bishops approach the Holy See on a range of necessary changes to canon law, including “criteria for the selection of bishops”, a critical issue to ensuring trust in the hierarchical leadership of the Church.

An [Open Letter to the Australian bishops](#) submitted by thousands of Australian Catholics in May 2017, months before the Royal Commission’s final report, anticipated correctly many of the Commission’s findings and specifically sought an urgent delegation, including laity, to Pope Francis advising him of the Royal Commission’s exposure of the Church’s global dysfunctional governance and requesting immediate reform of bishop selection processes, fully including the faithful in identifying the needs of dioceses and local selection criteria. The bishops did not respond to these detailed proposals, hardly the response of trusted leaders.

So to the title of this piece: *Should Australian Catholic Bishops be Trusted?* This is a question which, in light of the above considerations, should be considered by each individual bishop because their track record overall is not good, particularly at this time of crisis for the Church, in Australia and universally. At present, even Pope Francis is struggling with allegations of mishandling of clerical child sexual abuse.

It is time for courageous action on the part of our leaders to show strong pastoral leadership. It is notable that Bishop Long of Parramatta has spoken out strongly on matters of governance. I would suggest that the time has come for all our pastoral leaders to consider their position and, in conscience, to a) reform the governance of their own individual dioceses unilaterally as per the Commission’s [Recommendation 16.7](#), and b) demand reform of the governance of the universal Church with specific reference to the findings of the Australian Royal Commission. An alternative might be resignation.

That would certainly reinstate the trust of the faithful. As I suggested in an earlier post ([The Seal of Confession: resorting to the Age of Christendom](#)), it is time for bishops to listen to the people of their Church.

Peter Johnstone is a committed Catholic and a member of Catholics for Renewal. He gave public evidence to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse as a member of the governance panel in the Catholic ‘wrap-up’ hearings in February 2017.