

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: Case Study 50

6 February 2017

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse began Case Study 50, colloquially known as the Catholic ‘wrap up,’ today. This hearing is focussing on factors within the Church which contributed to the abuse crisis, and the response to it.

In this article, you will find a brief summary of today’s hearing. It is intended that these daily updates will follow the same format.

Opening statement by Senior Counsel Assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC

At the beginning of the hearing, Senior Counsel Assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC made an [opening statement](#), in which she outlined statistics relating to allegations of abuse in the Church in Australia since 1950.

In summary, the data showed that:

- Between January 1980 and February 2015, 4444 people made allegations of child sexual abuse which related to over 1000 institutions.
- 78% of complainants were male, who had the average age of 11.6 at the time the alleged abuse occurred, and 22% were female, with an average age of 10.5 at the time of alleged abuse.
- Of the 1880 alleged perpetrators identified, there were 592 religious brothers (32%), 572 Priests (30%), 543 lay people (29%) and 96 religious sisters (5%). Considered as an overall percentage of those serving between 1950 and 2010, 7.9% of diocesan Priests and 5.7% of religious Priests have had allegations made against them, making a total of 7% of Priests overall.

Ms Furness told the Commission that the Vatican had provided documents in relation to John Gerard Nestor, but did not respond to a more general request for all documents relating to Australia, instead asking for the request to be more specific, nor to a request for documents involving ongoing canonical proceedings.

Ms Furness described the cases the Commission has looked at so far as “depressingly similar,” where children were ignored or punished, allegations not investigated, Priests and religious moved and documents destroyed. She said that many children suffered then, and continue to suffer as adults, because of this.

Opening Statement by Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council

Mr Sullivan began by affirming the commitment of Catholic leaders to repairing the wrongs of the past, to listening to survivors and putting their needs first, and ensuring a safer future. He expressed admiration and gratitude for the survivors who came forward to tell their story.

Mr Sullivan acknowledged the data which had just been presented by Ms Furness, saying that it must be reckoned with, and noting that the hearing would provide the opportunity for this reckoning. He said that one child abused by a Catholic Priest or religious was appalling to all faithful Catholics, calling it a hypocrisy “grossly unbecoming a Church which seeks to be, and should be, held to its own high standard.”

In relation to the data, Mr Sullivan noted that it did not distinguish between allegations, substantiated allegations, admissions being made or convictions occurring. He said that it would be helpful to see comparable data for other institutions, including government ones. Regardless, he called the numbers shocking, tragic and indefensible; an indictment on the Church.

Mr Sullivan told the Commission that today's Church is significantly different from the Church in which this abuse was most rife, and commented on key changes made in response to the Commission, including the establishment of Catholic Professional Standards Limited (which will audit and publicly report on compliance of bishops and religious leaders with professional standards), the revisiting of monetary claims made in the past, the support for a national redress scheme and the expanding of safeguarding offices in dioceses and religious orders throughout Australia.

After Mr Sullivan spoke, Ms Furness briefly returned to outline the evidence which is expected to be heard over the coming days. She spoke about the structure of the Church, the problem of clericalism, celibacy and other issues. These will be covered by witnesses in the coming weeks.

Panel 1.1 - Fr Michael Whelan SM and Fr David Ranson

The first witnesses were Fr Michael Whelan SM and Fr David Ranson.

Fr Michael Whelan SM is Parish Priest of St Patrick's, Church Hill and Director of Aquinas Academy. Fr David Ranson is the Parish Priest of Holy Name, Wahroonga and Vicar General of the Diocese of Broken Bay. Both told the Royal Commission about their qualifications, including providing details of their doctorates.

Celibacy

Dr Ranson outlined courses he runs for clergy and seminarians regarding celibacy. He said that celibacy needs to be viewed in the positive light of a call to relationship rather than a renunciation of something, and that it should be seen as a way of being intimate with others.

Justice McClellan asked about mandatory celibacy, proposing that it would lead a person to suppress sexual thoughts, distorting their personality and manifest in offending against children.

Fr Ranson said that living celibately is not the same as being asexual, and that it does not deny sexual feeling or thought. He explained that sexual expression does not exhaust the ways of being intimate, and that indeed troubles arose when a person is made to believe that intimacy cannot exist outside of sex, closing themselves off from all forms of intimacy. He said that the Church does not tell its Priests to be celibate, but invites men who have first been called to celibacy to present themselves for Priesthood. Fr Whelan described mandatory celibacy as misguided and unjust.

Culture and governance

In addressing the culture and governance of the Church, Fr Whelan described it as a culture of empire-building, always presenting the best face, with clericalism treating Priests as superior to lay people. He called for more transparency in the appointment of bishops (with lay involvement), more women involved at every level of ministry, and lay people involved in seminary formation.

Fr Ranson said that in talking about hierarchy, it must be remembered that the Church is a community of communities, and that each community has to ask cultural questions of itself, rather than making a decision that “the Church needs to change.”

Change to the Church

In response to questions from Commissioner McClellan, Fr Whelan said that the community has every right to challenge the Church and ask for changes; he described the Commission as “prophetic.” Fr Ranson said that the Church must have the humility to learn from the Commission, but noted that recommendations needed to be realistic and feasible, commenting that the Commission would not be able to change the structure of the universal Church. He said that the Commission’s work needed to be a catalyst for a continuing inquiry within the Church itself.

The Commission adjourned for the day, and will resume again on Tuesday, 7 February at 10am.